



BLUE AND GRAY

WEEKLY



Stories of Brave Northern and Southern Boys in the Civil War.

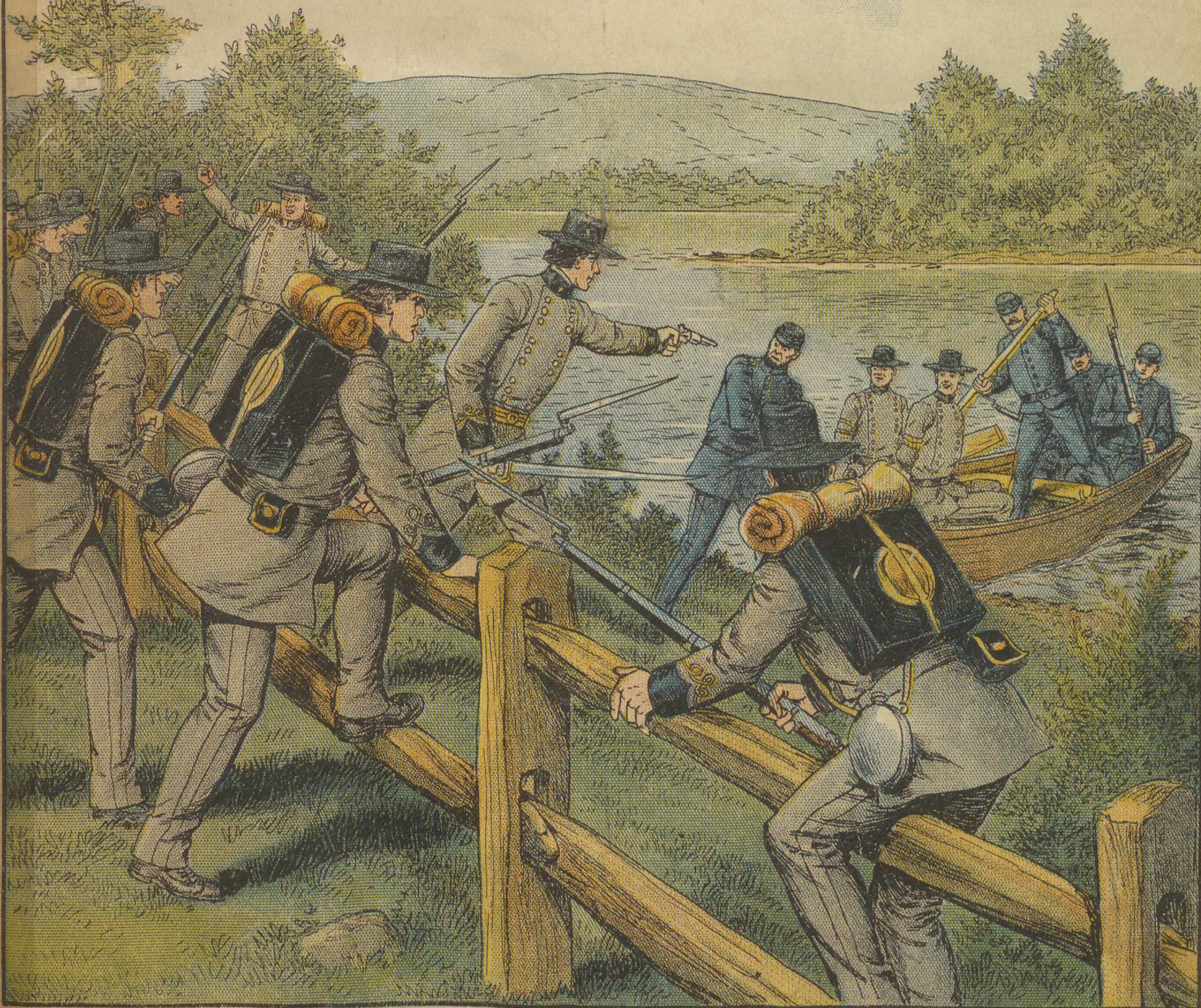
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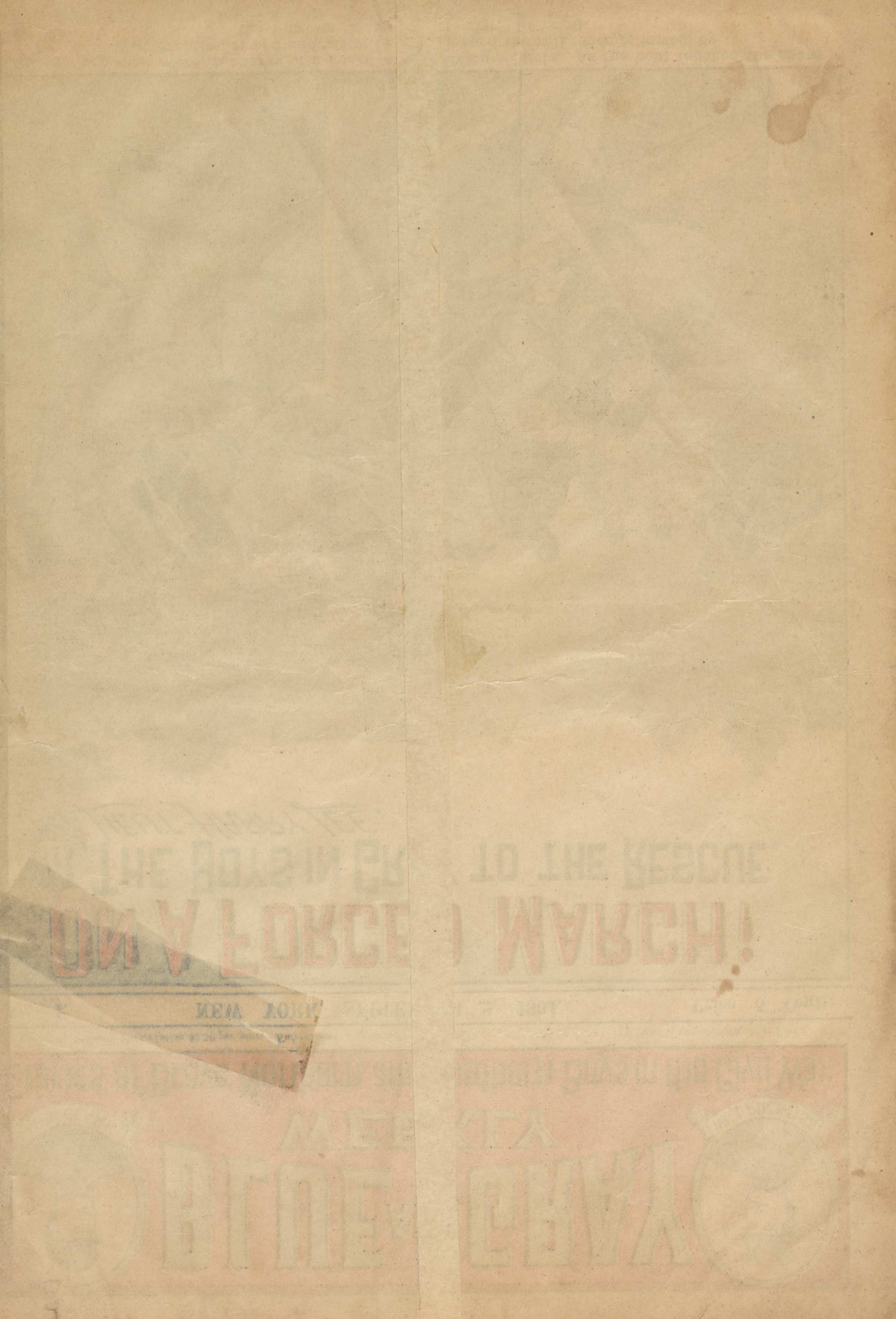
NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 2, 1904.

Price 5 Cents.

ON A FORCED MARCH; OR, THE BOYS IN GRAY TO THE RESCUE. *By LIEUT HARRY LEE.*



The two prisoners were in charge of a guard of four Union soldiers. As the boat touched the shore Will Prentiss, sword and pistol in hand, leaped the rail fence, followed by the Virginia Grays. "Surrender!" he cried.



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ON A FORCED MARCH;

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By LIEUT. HARRY LEE.

CHAPTER I.

AN IMPORTANT SUMMONS.

All was quiet on the Potomac. Such was the monotonous report which went forth from the War Department in Washington all that weary, suspenseful Autumn of 1861, while the great armies of the North and South lay in their trenches on either side of the Potomac, each waiting, apparently, for the other to be the first to advance.

Bull Run and Balls Bluff had been virtual victories for the Confederate Army, hence the spirit and confidence of the South was high.

In the encampment at Leesburg, early in November, was the little company of high-spirited Richmond youths, known as the Virginia Grays.

Will Prentiss, the son of Colonel Jeff Prentiss of the Confederate Regular Army, was their captain. He was a youth of rare parts, and skillful and courageous to a high degree.

The first lieutenant was Fred Randolph, of a very old Richmond family. He was equally as brave and popular as young Captain Prentiss.

The Virginia Grays were the best drilled and most popular company of youths in the Confederate Army.

When they marched through the streets of Richmond on their way to the front, when the Confederate Congress issued its call to arms, they were cheered wildly by the people, and many a brave heart thrilled and many an eye was tear-wet and sad.

Thus far they had greatly distinguished themselves in battle, and though it had been necessary to recruit their thinned ranks, there was always a waiting list among the youths of Richmond.

The day was clear and chill in the month of November in that memorable year of 1861.

The Virginia Grays had just marched in from a general review and Captain Prentiss entered his tent and laid his sword across his cot-bed and flung his hat upon it.

"Dear me," he said, disconsolately, "this is getting monotonous! If McClellan don't come out of his hole and give us some exercise pretty soon I shall feel like giving up. I am just dying for something to do!"

"Well, it is deuced slow, I'll admit," agreed Lieutenant Randolph, "but I will wager that when the ball does get to rolling there will be lively times."

"I respect the Union soldiers," said Will, "but their generals are slow. If Beauregard could only have his way, why——"

"Well, what?"

"I believe we'd be in Washington now and the Confederacy would have won its rights."

"Rights, eh?" said Fred Randolph, with a dubious shake of his head. "Are we quite sure that we are any more in the right than they are?"

"No," admitted Will, bluntly. "It is my opinion that the war is a mistake, and a most lamentable one. I speak from my knowledge of the Northern people, for I have attended school in Fairdale, New York, and my most intimate friend was Jack Clark, of that town. He is the finest fellow on earth, and we were like brothers. Yet now, we are foes."

"It is not right!"

"No, but still the South must maintain its honor."

"And I am a Southerner!"

"And so am I!"

"Yet——" and Will Prentiss paused and looked at his lieutenant, "the men of the North are our brothers. If either of us was assailed by a foreign foe, how quickly one would fly to the relief of the other."

"Indeed, that is true. Yet, this great war must go on. You and I are powerless to avoid it. It has got to be. We are officers in the Confederate Army, and we must do our duty."

"And we will do it!"

Will took up from the table a carefully delineated map.

"Here is a plan of the Federal fortifications at Washington," he said. "They little realize what an advantage we have over them. We know all their plans; they know none of ours. McClellan has already under his command one of the finest armies that the world ever saw."

"Its make-up is of the grandest."

"Just so! Yet he dallies and lingers. It is well for us that he does. If he had the gumption of our General Jackson——"

"What? McClellan is the best informed military man in America!"

"Very true! But he certainly lacks spirit or action, or he has a false idea of our resources."

"It is the latter."

"Do you think so?"

"I do."

"Well, that is unfortunate for him. If he should get behind our entrenchments at Manassas he would discover that every other gun is a wooden Quaker; that our men are mostly raw recruits and untrained in arms; that we number scarcely two-thirds of his forces. If he should attack us to-day, with all confidence and in force, I shudder at the possibilities!"

"That is just what our General Beauregard intends that he shall not do. Spies don't thrive at Manassas."

"Exactly. But I wish something would turn up. Naturally, I long for peace, but if there has got to be war, I desire to fight and settle the question."

Will sat down at the camp-table, and Fred yawned. Both certainly had a bad case of ennui.

But Will had hardly taken up his pen when a corporal appeared at the tent entrance.

He saluted, and said:

"A message for Captain Prentiss. The messenger is waiting for an answer."

Will took the message.

He gave a start as he saw the stamp of Army Headquarters on it.

"CAPTAIN WILL PRENTISS:

"I shall stop at the Carr House in Leesburg this evening. Call on me there at nine. I want to see you upon an important matter.

"BEAUREGARD, General Commanding."

Will's gaze kindled and he brought his hand down forcibly on the table.

"There is something up, Fred!" he cried. "The spell is broken!"

"You don't mean it?"

"Read that!"

Fred read the message. He whistled with delight and gazed at his brother officer.

"It means that something is up. We are about to be sent on some new expedition!"

"I trust it is not an individual mission," said Fred.

"I don't believe it. Let me see! This requires an answer."

So Will indited an answer to the great Confederate general. He gave it to the corporal and then looked at his watch.

It was not yet noon.

"It means a long wait," he said, impatiently. "We can't help it, though."

Fred now took his leave and for a time Captain Prentiss was busy with his correspondence.

He wrote a nice letter to his sister, who was in Richmond, at present. Her name was Nellie, and she was known as one of the most beautiful young women in the South.

Nellie Prentiss was a young woman of extraordinary ability. Not content with seeing her father and brother leave for the front, she had chosen to give her services to the Confederacy in no less effective if not as public a way.

In other words, she played successfully the part of an informer and spy, and spent much of her time in Washington, where she learned valuable secrets and carried them to the Confederate Congress.

Female spies were common in the early days of the war, and much of the first success of the Confederate arms was due to their work.

So Will wrote a cheerful and affectionate letter to his sister, telling her of the prospect of a new enterprise and of his many bright hopes for the future.

He had just finished the letter and was about to put his seal upon it, when he received a startling surprise.

He felt a soft touch on his arm and a voice said:

"It will not be necessary to mail that letter. I shall take pleasure in reading it now."

"Nellie!" ejaculated Will, as he leaped to his feet. His

handsome face showed his delight. "This is an unexpected pleasure."

The young Southern girl stood before him, dressed in a plain walking suit, which added to rather than detracted from her beauty.

"I just thought I would surprise my dear brother," laughed Nellie Prentiss.

"But—what has brought you to Leesburg, ma chere? What are you doing here?"

"I am on my way to Monocacy to consult with another secret service agent," she replied. "You know the railroad ends here. I shall proceed the rest of the way in the saddle."

"Why, Nell!" exclaimed Will, apprehensively, "have you an escort?"

"Only this!" and she displayed a pistol. "And you know how well I can use it!"

"But, sister mine, I don't like you to expose yourself thus."

"Pshaw! I am very discreet. You need have no fear. I am all right, but I have bad news."

"What is it?"

"A week ago General Beauregard sent Lieutenant Watson of the Engineer Corps up into the Kittocton Hills to survey a line across to the Potomac for some possible use. He was accompanied by Major Clifton and a guard of fifty men. They have all dropped out of sight. Not a man has returned. General Beauregard is very much excited——"

"By jingo!" interrupted Will.

"You surprise me," ejaculated Nellie. "What do you mean?"

"I have solved the problem. See here! This is a message from General Beauregard. He has an enterprise on hand for the Grays. I'll wager this is it!"

Nellie read the message and nodded.

"There is no doubt of it," she said. "I suppose you are not sorry?"

"Indeed, I am delighted! It will promise some excitement. We are all tired of lying inactive here."

"I should think you would be! I hope you will find the missing men."

"I shall try, Nell."

"I wish you success. And now I will go on my way before the day is spent."

Will embraced his sister and she left the tent. As she was about to mount her horse, however, she turned and said:

"I saw Jack Clark a few days ago."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"How is he?"

"He is captain of the Fairdale Blues and is winning glory on the Federal side."

Will gave a deep sigh.

"Poor Jack!" he said, in a regretful tone. "I hope we will not meet until after the war."

"Why?"

Will Prentiss shivered.

"I want to meet as friends. If we were to meet now, it would be as foes."

Nellie Prentiss was blushing prettily as her brother looked keenly at her.

"You still like him, Nell, don't you?"

"He is my country's foe!"

"Well, at that, he is defending his own country. He should be loyal. I respect him for that. You can't expect him, as a Northerner, to accept our Southern views."

Nell's eyes flashed, but her voice was softer as she said:

"Yet he must know that the South is right. Until that day comes when everybody is willing to acknowledge it, we must remain as strangers. Good-bye, brother."

She dashed away, while Will Prentiss looked after her with admiring eyes. He turned, with a sigh.

He knew that Nellie and Captain Jack Clark, his old school chum, were very fond of each other. But Jack was a Northerner, and at the outbreak of the war had raised a company of boys called the Fairdale Blues.

This common barrier had risen between the two young people and bade fair to keep them apart, perhaps forever.

For the rest of the day Captain Will Prentiss occupied himself with routine duties.

But when evening came he donned his dress uniform, buckled on his sword, and then at nine o'clock was at the door of the Carr House in Leesburg.

Orderlies were at the door and one took Will's name. In a few moments the word came back:

"General Beauregard requests you to enter."

Will followed the orderly and the next moment was in the presence of the famous Southern general.

General Beauregard did not arise, but acknowledged Will's salute with a slight bow. He looked at the young captain pleasantly, and said:

"Are you looking for a chance, Prentiss? I think I can fix you up all right."

CHAPTER II.

ON THE LONG MARCH.

"I am willing to undertake anything, General," replied Will, quietly. "I am subject to your orders."

"Suppose I should send you and your company into Washington?"

"We would go!"

General Beauregard laughed.

"That is far from my intentions," he said. "I think too much of the Grays, but I have some good work cut out for you."

"I am glad to hear that. My boys are very willing."

"I am going to send you on a dangerous enterprise."

"Indeed?"

"You may never return."

"That is a soldier's chance."

Beauregard looked intently at the handsome young officer. Something in the hard lines of his face grew softer.

"You did well at Balls Bluff, Prentiss," he said. "I have confidence in you. You must know that, when I single out you and your company for this hazardous enterprise."

"I am flattered and pleased," replied Will. "I will do my best."

"I feel assured of that. Now, let me tell you about the task I have for you."

General Beauregard took from his table a letter. He read it slowly. Then he turned and resumed:

"This letter is from one of our secret service agents at Alexandria. That, as you know, is at present within the Union lines."

"Yes, sir."

"Very good! The letter informs me that the writer has learned that General McClellan has received word—it seems rather indirect—that our survey party sent to Kittocton has been captured.

"Now, this party consists of Lieutenant Watson of the Engineer Corps, and Major Clifton, with an escort of fifty men. All are at present in the hands of the Federals at a place near Nolan's Ferry.

"Ordinarily, I might rest easy, for the chance of exchange for the officers is always good. But, unfortunately, it happens that Lieutenant Watson has in his possession certain facts concerning the next important move of the Federals, which I must get possession of. If I can get it, I shall be in a position to intercept that move and add another victory to our cause. Do you gather my meaning?"

Will had listened with interest.

"I do."

"Very good! It is imperative that a bold strike be made toward Nolan's Ferry and the party of Federals which has Watson as a prisoner must be overwhelmed and Watson rescued. I have selected you to accomplish this task."

Will drew a deep breath. The prospect dazzled him, but he replied:

"I will accept the commission."

"Very good! I feel sure you will succeed. Understand that it is a mission fraught with great danger. There is the possibility that you and your company may be entrapped. You must be eternally vigilant."

"I understand."

"Very good, Prentiss. This is all the help I can give you. Henceforth you must proceed at your discretion and be guided by your own sagacity, but you know what is required of you."

"I will accomplish the mission or give you a good excuse for failure," said Will, resolutely. "Is this all, sir?"

"No!" said the great general, arising and gripping Will's hand with emotion. "I feel it incumbent upon me to give you a word of caution, Prentiss. Your father is my old friend. I am a warm admirer of you and your young company, but I enjoin you earnestly not to throw your life away. Be cautious above all things."

"Thank you, General Beauregard," replied Will. "I will heed your advice."

Then he took his leave.

Will went quickly back to his company. The night was dark and a mournful wind went souging through the trees. In his tent he found Fred Randolph waiting for him.

The young lieutenant looked up, expectantly, as Will entered.

"Well?" he asked.

"I have seen him," said Will. "It is as I thought. We must go to the rescue of Major Clifton and Lieutenant Watson."

"Where are they?"

"As near as I can learn, at Nolan's Ferry or near there."

"Twenty-five miles from here."

"Is it? A good march."

"Indeed it is."

"For all that," said Will, "it must be done, and every man must be in readiness within an hour."

"Whew! you are going to make a forced march of it?"

"I am."

Fred Randolph left the tent quickly. The Boys in Gray were called from their tents by the drum and they quickly fell into line.

So well drilled and disciplined were they that every man was in the ranks in a brief space of time. Then inspection followed and the dealing out of rations for the rapid march was consummated.

No one understood better than Will Prentiss the necessity for quick action.

If the Federal soldiers, with their prisoners, should once get across the river at Nolan's Ferry the chance of rescue would be slight, indeed. Hence the necessity of a forced march to cut them off.

Just as the Virginia Grays were about to start on their exciting expedition an orderly dashed up.

"Captain Prentiss!"

"Here, sir!"

"A message from General Beauregard!"

Will read the order as follows:

"TO CAPTAIN WILL PRENTISS:

"Force your march to Nolan's. Get there by daylight if you can. I wish I could requisition horses for you, but there are none to be had here. Cut off the Federal troops, who are under Colonel Fraser of the New York Forty-ninth. I have ordered Harper to go up from Waterford and head them off to the north. Force your march!"

"(Signed) BEAUREGARD."

At once Will turned to his men.

"Virginia Grays," he cried, "I have orders to make a forced march. That means that only light equipments may be carried."

"We are equipped for that, Captain," said the second lieutenant.

"Very good! Attention! Forward! March!"

The Virginia Grays swung their caps in one prolonged

cheer. Then they started at a quick step on that march which was to linger long in their memories as one of the most thrilling experiences of the war.

They made a handsome spectacle as they marched through the glare of the line of campfires and struck out into the night.

Their natty uniforms of gray, the officers' being trimmed with gold lace, made a beautiful sight. At their head marched Will Prentiss, handsome and erect.

Once out upon the highway regular formation was abandoned. The boys fell out of line into irregular formation and groups. Thus they pushed on.

Beside Will marched Fred Randolph and a scout and guide, known as William Mason. He directed the course of the march.

Mason was an odd character. He had once been an Indian fighter and guide.

Five miles at such a rapid pace soon began to tell upon the boys. Several of them seemed to falter.

The night was dark. Leesburg was now far in their rear. They were approaching a range of hills.

Suddenly the guide came to a halt.

"Stop your men," he said, curtly.

"Halt!" shouted Will. The little company came to a stop. The scout held up his hand to enjoin silence.

All listened and then to their ears came a faint, thudding sound. The scout nodded and said:

"Cavalry."

"Ah!" cried Will. "Is that true? Had we not better form? It must be Union cavalry. None of ours are up this way."

The scout bowed.

"It is Union cavalry," he said. "What are your orders, Captain? Will you stand and meet them?"

For a moment Will was undecided. He hardly knew what to do.

He could only guess the number of the foe. They might be in overwhelming force. In that case a meeting was to be avoided.

He knew that the country was overrun with small detachments of Federal cavalry, which harassed the flanks of Beauregard's army.

Sometimes quite sharp engagements resulted from a too near approach of the foe. Ordinarily the young captain of the Virginia Grays would have welcomed such an affair.

But the importance of his mission warned him that to become embroiled with the enemy just now meant delay, and perhaps the defeat of his project.

So he decided not to court an engagement. He gave quick orders and the Virginia Grays deployed into the gloom beyond the highway and sought shelter behind the rail-fence.

The boys crouched low in the grass and waited. Nearer every moment came the tramp of the cavalry.

They were proceeding at a slow gait. A light shone in their advance and it was seen as they drew nearer that a man with a lantern rode ahead.

Occasionally he swung the lantern low, and, bending down in his saddle, scrutinized the ground.

When Will and Fred saw this movement they were startled.

"Do you see that, Will?" asked the young lieutenant.

"Indeed I do!"

"What does it mean?"

"I should say that they were following some sort of a trail in the road."

"Just so, but what will be the result when they come upon footprints in the dust?"

"Whew! That would mean discovery."

"I am afraid so."

The two young officers continued to watch the advancing column. As yet they had no means of guessing what their number was.

The rays of the lantern flashed on the front row and showed the officers in their blue uniforms and the lines of troopers behind.

Nearer they drew. It was a suspenseful time for the Virginia Grays.

Yet, Will felt that in case of discovery they had much the advantage. They were under cover and a deadly volley could be given the foe.

But the young captain's purpose was not to engage the cavalry, if possible, but to allow them to pass.

Nearer every moment they drew. Now they were right opposite the boys.

Just what Will and Fred had been looking for happened.

The man with the lantern swung it down close to the dust-covered highway. Then a sharp exclamation escaped his lips.

He drew up his horse.

"Halt!"

The order was given by the captain of the troop. The cavalymen came to a full stop. A couple of the officers rode forward.

"Well, Slocum," asked one of them, "what have you found now?"

The scout, for such the man with the lantern was, replied:

"A large body of men has passed this way. The road is trodden with many feet."

"Infantry?"

"Yes."

"Well, what do you make of it?"

The scout slipped from his horse. He went along the highway on foot. Suddenly he stepped to the rail-fence and flashed the rays of the lantern over it.

The result was thrilling.

The lantern shone full upon Will Prentiss and Fred Randolph. With a yell the scout sprung back.

"The Confederates!" he yelled. "Look out for yourselves, Yankees!"

But Will Prentiss raised his voice and shouted with all his lungs:

"Surrender! You are all surrounded!"

At the same moment the Virginia Grays sprung to their feet and began to swarm over the fence. Will knew that the one who struck the first blow had the advantage.

But the Federal troopers had no idea of surrendering. With a yell they discharged their carbines and flashed out their swords for the charge.

"Fire!" shouted Will. "After them, Grays! Head them off!"

Into the roadway surged the company of Grays. A volley was fired, and with deadly effect. The horses of the cavalry broke and fled back. A genuine rout ensued.

A dozen dead and wounded of the troopers lay in the roadway. The Boys in Gray pressed forward.

In a few moments the cavalry was in swift retreat down the road in the darkness. A couple of prisoners were held by the victorious Grays.

One of these was a richly uniformed officer and the other was Slocum, the scout. When the affair was over and young Captain Prentiss was able to give his attention to them he proceeded to take a look at the prisoners.

"Ah! gentlemen," he said, courteously, "you have been unfortunate."

"So it seems," replied the officer in the rich uniform. "I trust you will accord us the privileges of prisoners of war."

"Am I assured that you are not guerrillas?" asked Will.

"Do we look it?"

"Appearances are sometimes deceptive. I must ask your name and rank."

"If I were to tell you, it would be to utter a lie. That you will spare me, I know," and the Union officer spoke with hauteur which almost savored of defiance.

CHAPTER III.

A RUNNING FIGHT.

Will Prentiss peered into the speaker's face. The reply somehow surprised him.

"You refuse to give your name?" he asked.

"I am compelled to," replied the officer.

"I can see by your uniform that you are of higher rank than the commander of a troop of cavalry. Since you will not give me your name of your own accord I must employ other methods of discovering your identity."

"As you please, Captain. I assume that you are of the Confederate Army."

"I am Captain Will Prentiss of the Virginia Grays, at present under Beauregard's command."

The officer gave a start.

"I have heard of you before," he said. "You have a brave lot of men, Captain Prentiss. I recall you now. You were at Balls Bluff."

"Yes. Were you there, also?" asked Will.

"Yes."

Again Will peered keenly into the prisoner's face by the

light of the lantern taken from Slocum, the scout, but he could not recall having ever seen him before.

Far down the highway the Union troopers were making a vain effort to rally, but the Grays held the road with regular and sweeping volleys of musketry.

"Corporal Smith!" called Will, with sudden decision. The corporal saluted.

"Take two men and search the prisoner. Search him well."

Then ensued a search of the Union officer's person. Every pocket was turned inside out. His coat and waistcoat were removed, and even his boots.

In the lining of his coat was found an odd document. It was written partly in cipher.

But the most important part of it was easily read and furnished a revelation to Will.

"TO GENERAL WESLEY:

"Immediately upon receipt of this I want you to throw a regiment across the Potomac at Conrad's Ferry. Hold that point, and make reconnaissance toward Leesburg and also north toward Nolan's Ferry. You will wait for Colonel Fraser, who has prisoners on whom was found valuable information regarding the next move of the Confederate Army. This information I have not received in full. I shall expect you to hold any force at bay that may seek to cut Fraser off. I will hold reinforcements in readiness in case you are attacked by a larger force than you can hold. You must protect Fraser at all costs.

"(Signed) McCLELLAN,
"General Commanding."

Will read this order several times with deepest interest. Then he looked at the Union officer.

"You are General Wesley?" he asked.

"No," replied the prisoner.

"You are not?"

"I am not."

"How came you, then, in possession of this order?"

"General McClellan gave it to me to deliver to General Wesley."

"Ah! You have not yet delivered it?"

"No. It looks now as if I should not be able to deliver it," said the prisoner with a smile.

"I fear, indeed, you will not," said Will. "I shall send you to Manassas as a prisoner of war. As for you, sir," to Slocum, "General Beauregard shall decide as to what your fate shall be. If he decides you are a spy, you know what your end will be!"

The scout bowed stiffly.

"I am a Union scout," he said. "I am not afraid to admit it."

Will placed General McClellan's order to General Wesley in his pocket. He saw now that it was more than ever necessary to make a forced march to Nolan's Ferry.

It was more than likely that some other courier had been sent with a similar message to Wesley.

In that event it was advisable to intercept Fraser at the

earliest possible moment. Will was much puzzled as to the identity of the bearer of the order.

He felt sure that he was a man of more than ordinary rank. At any rate, his identity would undoubtedly be known when he faced General Beauregard.

It was Will's purpose to detach a corporal and guard to take the prisoner to Manassas, but just at that moment firing was resumed in the advance line down the highway.

Lieutenant Randolph came rushing up.

"There is trouble ahead, Captain," he cried. "There seem to be reinforcements arriving for the cavalry troop. They outnumber us greatly."

A chuckle at Will's elbow caused him to turn. The Union officer's face showed plainly his exultation.

"Presently I will require you to return me that dispatch," he said. "There is no escape for you. It is a nice little trap you are in."

"A trap!" exclaimed Will. "Do you believe that?"

"I know it."

"Very good," said the young captain, coolly; "if we are in a trap we will work out of it. It is not the first time."

"Let me tell you that three thousand Federal troops lie in your path," said the prisoner. "No forced march will enable you to reach Nolan's Ferry in time to intercept Fraser or rescue the Confederate prisoners. By to-morrow night they will have been shot!"

"What!" exclaimed Will, in horror. "That is murder!"

"No, it is war!" said the prisoner, quietly. "Those men were spies in the truest sense of the word. They were employed in getting plans of our works and of spying upon our military operations."

Just then wild cheers rose upon the night air. A volley of musketry drowned it and in the gloom Will Prentiss saw dark figures rushing down the slope on the north-erly side of the highway.

The young captain of the Virginia Grays saw at once that it would be folly to endeavor to check that assault.

The foe were ten to one, and the Grays would be overwhelmed. The air was full of bullets and the din was terrific.

That the Federals should be in such force so near to Leesburg was a matter of much surprise to Will.

It added color to a startling idea which he had conceived—that McClellan was making a move toward the left flank of Beauregard's army, and that the attack which he had feebly made in front was but a feint.

Will Prentiss had no intention of seeing his company cut all to pieces. He gave quick orders and they fell back across the road and into a growth of oak scrub on the other side.

Here they replied to the fire of the charging Unionists. A hot running fight ensued. And it was a lively one.

The Virginia Grays kept falling back. All this while Will had given no thought to the prisoners. They had been left in charge of a corporal and his guard.

The fight grew hotter and the Grays kept retiring. Will had no idea as to where they were being driven.

It was his one hope to hold the enemy until daylight. By that time word should have reached Beauregard and reinforcements ought to arrive.

The Virginia Grays did excellent work in the face of that murderous fire. Their retreat was most orderly.

In the darkness it was difficult to tell friend from foe and had the forces come to close quarters the result would have been most deadly.

But Will took care this should not happen. All through the night the savage fight went on.

And all the while the Grays kept falling back. Miles must have been covered and it was a matter of wonderment to Will that the foe should keep up the chase.

But all things have an end. And so the great retreat finally was finished.

Just before daybreak the Federal pursuers drew off. All that night across fields and pasture and swamp, through groves of trees and plantations, the pursuit had been made.

But now, with the break of day, the Federals fell back. The Virginia Grays were at the moment on the summit of a small eminence. They were in a good position.

So it was with some disappointment that the Grays saw the foe draw off. For they felt so secure in their position that they could have faced the foe and felt sure of holding them.

Moreover Will had fancied that by drawing the Federals thus into the country away from the Potomac, if Beauregard sent reinforcements they might come up in the rear and thus trap the foe.

It is possible the Union commander realized this, for he drew off and with the first break of daylight was far on his way back to the Potomac.

The Virginia Grays could not have made pursuit even had they been so disposed.

They were utterly exhausted with the night's work. In fact, Will saw that it was necessary for them to rest on their arms for a few hours at least.

So he gave orders for a bivouac. The boys, after partaking of their slender rations, were glad to roll themselves up in their blankets and sleep on the ground.

But there was no sleep for the young officers of the little company.

Will and Fred proceeded to take a look around them. They saw that they had covered many miles during the night and were somewhere above Waterford.

Behind them flowed the sluggish waters of a creek.

Will went down and looked at the stream. He saw that it was deep and would easily float boats or rafts.

He had no doubt that it emptied into the Potomac.

An idea occurred to him, and this was to follow the course of the creek, which seemed to run northward. No doubt there were fordways where he could cross and then cut across the country for Nolan's Ferry.

He studied his maps and finally decided upon this move.

"We will cross the creek at the first opportunity," he said to Fred Randolph. "If we are attacked again we shall have the waters of the creek between us and the foe."

"I think it is a good scheme," agreed Fred. "It will also be a short cut to Nolan's."

"Just so! That was a hard fight last night, Fred. How many of the boys did we lose?"

"Eight, as far as I can learn. There are five wounded. Over yonder is the plantation of Colonel Spear, who will take care of the wounded for us."

"Colonel Spear!" exclaimed Will. "The name is familiar."

"He knows your father well. He is a bluff old fellow, and exceedingly loyal to the Confederacy."

"You say he has offered to take care of our wounded boys?"

"Yes. I could see no better way of caring for them. As this march is forced, and must be rapid, we cannot very well carry our wounded."

"It is an excellent plan, Fred. Let us go over and see Colonel Spear."

The dead they could not bury, for they were scattered along the line of the night's retreat, and there was no time to search for them.

Will and Fred walked over to the Spear plantation. As they entered the yard and passed up the flower-bordered walk they saw a tall, angular-featured man sitting on the piazza.

Colonel Spear was a type of the hospitable old Virginian. He was an ardent fox hunter, a heavy drinker and a good raconteur.

He greeted the boys warmly.

"Welcome to ye!" he cried. "I hear ye whipped the Yanks last night, an' thet did me a heap of good. I tell ye, the Confederacy is coming out on top."

"We hope so, Colonel Spear," said Will. "My lieutenant tells me that you will care for our wounded boys until our return."

"You kin rest easy there, my boys. I'll be a father to 'em as long as ye wish. But what's yer move from here?"

"We are going to Nolan's Ferry."

"Whew! Aren't ye takin' chances?"

"How so?"

"Nolan's Ferry is in the hands of thet slick Yankee, General Wesley. He has got four or five thousand men there. You're only a mouthful for him."

"We are under orders," said Will. "We must cut off a detachment under the Union colonel, Fraser, up in the Kittocton region."

"The deuce! You are going right into the jaws of the lion!"

"You think so?"

"I know so!"

"Nevertheless, we are under orders and must go! However, we have a good line on the enemy's plans. We have captured a couple of men—one, an officer, and the other, a scout——"

"Is his name Slocum?"

"Yes."

"There you are," cried Spear. "He was here for a few days under an assumed name, but I found out his

identity and was about to turn him over to one of our patrols but he escaped."

"Do you know the other prisoner?"

"What is his name?"

Will and Fred looked at each other. They recalled the fact that the prisoner would not reveal his name.

"He refuses to disclose it," said Will. "By the way, Fred, do you know if the prisoners were kept safely under guard during the retreat?"

Fred did not know this.

CHAPTER IV.

IMPORTANT REVELATIONS.

"I cannot say," replied the young lieutenant. "There was so much hot fighting all the way that I had no time to think of prisoners."

"Were they not taken charge of by Corporal Stone?"

"Yes."

"Let us go back, then, and see if they are still in our hands."

"Very well."

"I am interested," said Colonel Spear. "I'd like to see thet Slocum again. He's a right smart chap in his line."

"All right, Colonel Spear."

So the planter accompanied the two young officers back to the ridge. Will at once sought for Corporal Stone.

That officer responded, and, with a salute, said:

"We held the prisoners, sir, until we got to the creek, which we had to cross in the darkness. Then thet fellow you called a scout broke away."

"Slocum! You let him escape?"

"We couldn't help it, sir!"

"Where is the other prisoner?"

"Out there under the ridge, sir."

"Bring him up here."

Spear was disappointed at Slocum's escape, but he lingered in the chance of recognizing the other prisoner.

In a few moments the corporal came into view, leading the prisoner. He came up coolly and with confidence until his gaze rested upon Spear.

Then he turned deadly pale.

Spear gave a sharp cry.

"Jericho!" he gasped. "It's the traitor, Meldon! Don't you know him now, Captain Prentiss? Don't you remember Major Meldon, of the Fifteenth North Carolina, who deserted after Bull Run and took valuable papers to Washington? He's a spy and a traitor and a turncoat! Hang him and give him his deserts!"

Will was astounded.

He had heard of Meldon, the traitor, who, after a quarrel with Beauregard, had deserted to the Federal cause.

He understood all now.

Meldon had been piloting the Union cavalry to head him off. There was no doubt of this. Using his character as

a Southerner, Meldon was able to go among the planters and learn facts regarding the movements and plans of the Confederate forces that could be gained in no other way.

These he conveyed to the Union generals. The uniform he wore was a blind and signified no especial command that he held.

Beauregard had placed a heavy price on the head of the villain. As Will and Fred recalled this they were deeply thrilled.

"Are you Major Meldon?" asked Will, in a cold voice.

The deserter and spy was trembling like a leaf. He replied, in a weak voice:

"Give me a chance! I'll turn over a new leaf, if you will. I'll give you information that will enable you to rescue Clifton and Watson and their men."

"Don't believe him, Captain," cried Spear. "Shoot him at twenty paces! You can't trust him."

Will hesitated. He knew that this was only the deserving fate of a traitor, but he could not feel that he had sufficient authority to order the execution of the prisoner.

This, he believed, was the privilege of General Beauregard alone. The prisoner must be turned over to him.

"Don't shoot me!" pleaded the spy and traitor.

"It is plain that you are a coward," said Will, coldly. "If I were to give you justice it would be to stand you up before a line of men and shoot you. But I have no intention of doing that, so rest easy."

The prisoner's manner grew eager.

"I know I did wrong," he pleaded, "but it was Beauregard's fault. He drove me to desperation. It was a thoughtless act, and I have repented it many times over. I am eager to come back into the Confederacy. I can give you wonderful aid. I have information worth everything to you!"

The fellow pleaded long and earnestly. Will listened silently.

Spear sniffed and spat tobacco juice and reiterated his declaration that the prisoner ought to be shot.

But the young captain was not a hot-head like Colonel Spear. He was cool and clever, and saw at once that it was possible to make use of the material before him.

So he said:

"It is not necessary for you to make any more promises, Meldon. It is not my privilege to take your life, nor my desire. I cannot either give you your liberty, but it is possible that I can avert the fate which hangs over you if you make good your pledge to aid us."

"I will! I will! I swear it!" he cried.

"Very good. A moment ago you spoke of assisting us to rescue Major Clifton and Lieutenant Watson."

"Yes! Yes! I can assist you to do that."

"How?"

Meldon's manner changed. Some of the pallor left his face. A crafty light crept into his eyes.

"I will tell you," he said. "Watson and Clifton are in the hands of Fraser and his regiment. Now, Fraser has been ordered to take them to Nolan's Ferry. There a heavy

force of U. S. troops will meet him. Thereafter the two prisoners will be taken to Washington and hanged.

"This order had been sent to Fraser, but it has not reached him. You have it in your possession. You took it from me."

"Go on," said Will, quietly.

"Now, at the present moment, Fraser and his prisoners are in the Kittocton Hills hiding. They are waiting these very orders which you have intercepted."

"And you know their hiding place?"

"I do."

"You will take us there?"

"If you will promise me freedom."

"I will endeavor to do more than that for you," said Will, "and that is, full pardon from President Davis for your crime. Is not this enough?"

"And it will make of me once more a trusted citizen of the Confederacy?"

"I think so."

"I will do it!" cried Meldon.

"One moment."

"Well?"

"Has General McClellan sent any other courier to Fraser with the same or a like order?"

"No."

"Very good!" said the boy captain of the Virginia Grays. "For the present you are a prisoner. We shall give you the chance to make good your promise. When you have proved your sincerity you shall be repaid."

"I ask no more," declared Meldon. "Fortune is with you, young man. In capturing me you have done a great thing. To prove this let me show you how you were going blindly into a trap."

"A trap?"

"Yes."

"I am interested."

"Very good!" said Meldon. "In the first place, it was known by General McClellan but a few hours later when General Beauregard gave you the commission to go in quest of and intercept Fraser."

Will was astounded.

"Do you mean that?"

"I do. General McClellan at once ordered General Wesley to proceed to Nolan's Ferry with a strong force. Detachments were to be sent south and north. One detachment was to cross the path of Captain Harper, who was to march down from Waterford and reinforce you at Nolan's Ferry."

Will was astounded. The Confederate traitor certainly had full possession of General Beauregard's plan.

"How did you secure all this information?" he asked.

"From a spy."

"Who?"

"I do not know his name, but he is an officer close to Beauregard."

"Another traitor!" exclaimed Fred Randolph.

"Yes," cried Spear, "but he couldn't be greater than the one we have here."

"I fail to understand your vindictive spirit toward me," said Meldon.

"You are a traitor to the Confederacy, and for such I have no use," retorted Spear.

Will was now reflective.

He saw that in marching to Kittocton blindly as he was he had been walking into the jaws of a trap.

Had the detachment of Union troops he met on the Leesburg highway a few hours before passed him by without discovery he would have marched straight into the trap.

Before another night he and his Virginia Grays would have been prisoners in the hands of McClellan.

Will could not help a little shiver, but he saw now that the night's running fight had been his salvation.

He was too near Waterford and a junction with Harper and his men to fear that the Union detachment would get behind him and drive him into the camp of the foe at Nolan's Ferry.

Will saw now that his only plan was to shun Nolan's Ferry, and, passing to the north of Waterford, if possible, effect a junction with Harper and then passing around half of the circle, throw his company between Kittocton and the Ferry.

This would give him the chance to lie in wait for Fraser when he should receive another message to march to the ferry.

The plan and its possibilities appealed to the young captain of the Virginia Grays.

He was disposed to believe that Meldon was telling the truth.

The traitor knew well that his life was at stake, and he would hardly dare gamble on the chances against him now.

Will turned to Corporal Stone.

"Take the prisoner back," he said. "In one hour beat the reveille. Tell Sergeant Spotswood I want to see him."

The corporal led the prisoner away. In a few moments a tall, powerful young Virginian presented himself and saluted.

"Spotswood," said Will, "do you know the country around Kittocton?"

"Every inch of it, sir. . . Old Indian country; great tobacco region in olden times."

"Exactly! Do you see this creek? Where does it flow?"

"Into the Kittocton Creek and eventually into the Potomac River."

"Very good! Could small boats or rafts float all the way?"

"Yes, but——"

"Well?"

"Are you going to High Ridge, where Fraser is supposed to be encamped?"

"Is that where Fraser is at present?" asked Will of Fred Randolph. "Didn't Meldon say that was the place?"

"Yes," replied the young lieutenant.

"Well," said Spotswood, "the creek will be a cut-off in going to High Ridge, for it passes within four miles of it

and beyond it, but the Kittocton Creek empties into the Potomac far above Nolan's Ferry."

"We can follow the creek as far as High Ridge?" asked Will.

"Oh, yes."

"Very good. Now, Sergeant Spotswood, I want you and Joe Champney, Ben Cutler and Sam Payton to take a quick trip down the creek and find some kind of a boat or boats. Return not later than one hour, whether you succeed or not."

The sergeant saluted.

"All right, Captain," he said; "we will report in one hour."

The four youths departed on their errand. There seemed little danger of running across the Union foe, though the Boys in Gray proceeded with due caution.

In half an hour they returned and said they had found four flatboats that would carry thirty men each. The boats were propelled with poles.

"That is sufficient," said Will. "Be ready when the reveille beats."

At the appointed time the little drummer boy of the company beat the reveille and in a flash the well-trained young soldiers were up, had rolled their blankets and were in line.

Will addressed them:

"Virginia Grays," he cried, "we are going to float down the creek for a ways and then march across country to High Ridge. We should reach our destination before dark. We are going through a perilous region. We have escaped the jaws of one trap of death only to, perhaps, walk into another. You must stand ready to do your duty and to fight, if need be, to the death for our flag."

The Virginia Grays cheered wildly.

Then they started for the creek. Colonel Spear, whose blood was stirred by the scene, swung his hat and cheered them repeatedly.

In a few minutes the boys were all aboard the flatboats and floating rapidly down the stream.

With the aid of the long poles they could make much better time than if they had been afoot.

For some while all went on swimmingly. They were now north of Waterford and could see the Kittocton Hills plainly.

Then a startling thing happened. It almost proved their undoing.

The flatboat in the lead and aboard which was, with others, Will Prentiss, Fred Randolph and Major Meldon, suddenly crashed into some obstruction in the river and for a moment hung in the current.

"We're aground," was the cry that went up. But Joe Spotswood in the bow shouted:

"No, it's not so; it's a chain!"

"A chain?" gasped Will, with a sudden chill. "Are you sure of that?"

"See for yourself."

Will leaned over the side and looked into the water. He

saw a heavy steel chain, supported by floats, which extended across the stream.

It was a startling revelation. Will looked apprehensively at the shore. The woods rose on either side, deep and heavy in growth.

How much of a force lurked in those woodland depths Will did not know. Just then a sharp voice came ominously across the waters of the stream:

"Hold up and surrender, you Southern dogs, or we'll blow you into perdition!"

CHAPTER V.

THE SPY ESCAPES.

It is hard to describe the sensation of those on the flatboats. For a moment Will felt sure that they were to receive a death-dealing volley.

Packed aboard the flatboats the boys were perfectly helpless. They were fully exposed to the enemy's fire and might be slaughtered like sheep.

All four flatboats were now up against the chain. It was too powerful an obstacle to easily break.

It was certainly a desperate situation, and for a moment young Captain Prentiss was almost ready to accept the belief that all was lost and surrender inevitable.

But Will quickly recovered his nerve and now shouted back a reply to the hail from the woods:

"We don't surrender! Look out for your rear; you are surrounded and it is you who shall surrender!"

A mocking laugh came back from the shore and a shot followed. The bullet cut the rim of Will's hat.

In an instant the young Virginian's blood was fired.

"Put the boats ashore, boys!" he shouted. "Let us sweep the Yankees out of those woods!"

A rousing cheer went up from the Boys in Gray and they gave way at the sweep oars and poles.

The boats were slowly forced to the shore. Every moment Will expected raking volleys that should stretch his comrades dead and dying about him.

But he knew the move he was making was the only one he could make under the circumstances.

It was certainly better to die on shore fighting the foe to the last than to perish miserably there in mid-stream.

But to his own gratification and amazement as well, no volley was fired.

The boats touched the shore and the Virginia Grays leaped out. With fixed bayonets they rushed up the bank.

Not a shot was fired, not a foe was to be seen.

"By jingo!" exclaimed Fred Randolph, as he joined Will. "What do you think of it? Where is the foe?"

"Surely we are not dreaming," said Will. "We were hailed and fired upon."

"Certainly!"

"It is very strange. Send skirmishers out through the woods."

Instantly a thin line of the soldier boys were thrown into the woods. Fifty yards from the shore they found the embers of a campfire.

Cooking utensils were scattered about. Several articles of wearing apparel and some partly cooked viands were found.

Then Will began to comprehend the situation. They had simply stumbled upon a small picket or outpost of the Federals.

It taught the young captain several important facts.

One was that some detachment of Wesley's force was near. Also, that the chain had been stretched across the creek at some distant time, perhaps months before, when Stonewall Jackson was sweeping toward West Virginia.

Scouts were sent ahead and Will made a halt until they should return.

He had no desire to walk full upon a vastly superior force of the Federals. It might mean annihilation.

It began to look now as if he would have to abandon his plan of floating down to the Kittocton Creek.

He knew that if a superior force was before him his only plan was to fall back and proceed along the south branch of the creek.

It would not do to again run the risk of being taken at such a disadvantage as would be the case on board the flatboats.

So Will awaited the return of his scouts. In the meantime he set his men at work throwing up a rough entrenchment and felling trees for a rude abattis.

He did not by any means feel sure of his ground. He began to realize fully that the mission given him by General Beauregard was an arduous one.

It seemed as if he was bound to come in contact with the Federals at every turn. The region seemed to swarm with them.

He paced up and down the bank of the creek impatiently. Major Meldon, the prisoner, watched him intently.

Presently Meldon called out:

"Captain Prentiss, if you will allow me to act as guide I can take you through all safe and rescue your men at that."

Will looked at Meldon sharply. He was not ready to trust the traitor and spy.

"Indeed!" he said, "I suppose you know this region well?"

"Every foot of it, and I know that it is overrun with detachments of the Yankees."

"I can see that for myself. But I think we shall get along without further assistance, though I thank you for the same."

"As you please," said Meldon, with a bow. "I made the offer in good faith."

Just then a couple of the boys sent ahead as scouts came in.

Their report was thrilling.

"The Union forces are not a mile distant and coming this way," they reported. "They are moving in a half circle and must be upon us very soon."

As near as could be learned from the report of the scouts the foe outnumbered the Grays fully three to one.

Will was satisfied, however, that he had not come in contact with Wesley's whole force.

It was doubtless a detachment, perhaps three or four hundred strong. This was odds which the little company of Grays could hardly afford to meet.

Will was now in a quandary.

He knew that he must move, and quickly, too. If he was to put the creek between him and the foe there was no time to lose.

On the other hand his position was not altogether untenable. Entrenchments of a fairly good sort had been dug. Trees had been felled for a breastwork.

They had the flatboats behind them in case it became necessary to retreat.

Will did not believe the Union troops would cross the creek to surround him. It would take a force of several thousand men to do this effectually.

And he did not believe any such force was before him.

The young captain of the Grays was in great indecision. In his extremity he obeyed a whim and turned to Meldon.

"What shall I do? The foe are before me three to one. I can cross the creek now and prevent their crossing, or I can stand my ground and incur the risk of being beaten."

Meldon smiled in a curious way.

"You know the rule of Frederick the Great," he said. "A force to attack a foe behind entrenchments must outnumber them four to one."

"It is settled," cried Will. "We will stand our ground."

At once he gave orders for the disposition of his men in such a way that the foe must meet with heavy loss at the first onslaught. There was nothing to do now but wait.

The skirmishers were being rapidly driven in from the woods.

Soon the blue uniforms were seen and then the cheering of the Union line was heard as it moved down rapidly toward the Confederate defences.

"Steady, boys!" said Will, sternly. "Wait till they get very near. Wait for the word!"

Suddenly out of the woods burst the whole long line of blue.

A rousing cheer went up. It was answered by the Grays and now Will Prentiss cried with all his strength:

"Give it to them, boys! Fire!"

The first volley of the Grays was a well-timed and deadly one.

It caused the blue line to waver. Men fell in the line, making gaps which, however, were quickly filled.

But the second volley hurled the blue line a little further back. It was the supreme moment.

But Will Prentiss knew what to do. He was the man of the hour. He was ready for the occasion.

"Fix bayonets!" he shouted.

It was Napoleon's familiar tactics. The moment the line of the foe, at close range, begins to waver, give them the bayonet.

Over their breastworks with a wild cheer went the Grays.

A glittering line of invincible steel they swept down upon the Union line irresistibly. Nothing could have withstood such an onslaught.

The line of blue melted and was swept back into the woods.

But Will Prentiss was wise. He did not allow victory to overbalance his judgment. He only kept up the pursuit for a short distance.

Then the Grays retired in good order to their entrenchments. They had no fear of the return of the foe that day. Not until they had been strongly reinforced would they return to the attack.

Fred Randolph had been in the thickest of it. He was badly scratched and bruised, but not seriously wounded.

"Well, Will," he cried as he met his young captain, after the fight, "fortune was with us, was it not?"

"You are right. How many men did we lose?"

"Only five, and three wounded. The enemy lost a score, at least."

"See that the wounded are cared for. We have no time to bury the dead. We have got to get out of here the quickest way."

"That is right. They will return with a larger force."

"Yes. I don't know whether we shall carry out our mission or not, Fred, losing men as rapidly as this. It looks dubious if we don't have reinforcements."

"We must unite with Harper!"

"It is odd that we do not hear from him."

"That is right!"

"Well, there is a good piece of the day left. Get every man in marching order. We will fall back across the creek and follow down the south bank."

"All right, captain."

Fred saluted and was about to turn away. But at that moment Sergeant Spotswood came rushing up excitedly.

"Captain Prentiss!" he cried. "It is a bit of hard luck! He has escaped!"

"Escaped!" cried Will. "Whom do you mean?"

"The prisoner! Major Meldon!"

"Meldon escaped!" cried Will with a gasp. "The deuce! that won't do! How did it happen? Who is to blame?"

"I don't know, sir! Corporal Stone, poor fellow, was left with him during the bayonet charge. We found him dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes, sir! His skull was crushed. The ropes which bound Major Meldon lay on the ground cut as by a knife. That was all that we could discover, sir."

Aghast, Will hurried to the spot. He found that he had been told the truth.

Corporal Stone, with a crushed skull, lay on the ground just under the breastwork of trees. Beside him was a blood-stained club.

The ropes which had bound Meldon lay on the ground beside him. The solution of the mystery was not difficult.

In some manner the prisoner had freed his hands and

taking Stone by surprise had knocked him over with the club.

It was certainly easy enough then for the villain in the excitement of the battle to make his escape.

It was a catastrophe which meant much to Captain Will Prentiss.

He had appreciated fully hitherto the importance of the capture of the traitor and spy and he knew that General Beauregard would have been greatly pleased.

But it could not be helped. To attempt pursuit of Meldon at the moment would have been folly.

He was doubtless ere this in the Union lines. And this, in itself, added greatly to the danger of the little company of Virginia Grays.

There was no doubt that Meldon would betray their condition to the foe and even lead them to another attack upon the Grays.

Will now regretted that he had not at once risked sending him to Manassas with a special guard. Certainly no worse result could have occurred.

"Well," said Fred Randolph, with a shrug of the shoulders, "we would have lost nothing by having him shot as a spy."

"We would have exceeded our authority by doing that, inasmuch as General Beauregard had offered a reward for his capture," said Will, "though doubtless he deserved the fate. But it cannot be helped now. See that poor Stone is buried at once with all possible honors. I will defer our change of position for that purpose."

So, with the tap of the drum, Corporal Stone's body, wrapped in a flag of the Confederacy, was carried to a grave hastily dug on the banks of the creek.

Will Prentiss himself repeated the final prayer over the dead soldier's body. Reverently the Boys in Gray stood about the grave.

Then they marched to the flatboats. All got aboard and were ferried across to the south bank of the creek.

They had barely accomplished this move when scouts came in with the thrilling intelligence that the repulsed Union regiment, heavily reinforced, was coming back.

"Let them come," said Will Prentiss, grimly. "We are out of their reach for the present. If they want to cross the creek and attack us, let them try it."

CHAPTER VI.

A MESSAGE FROM HARPER.

Will Prentiss had no intention of waiting to court battle again with the detachment of Union troops.

His one idea was to finish his forced march to High Ridge and if possible to cut off Fraser before he could reach Nolan's Ferry.

So the Virginia Grays were ordered forward again at a rapid pace.

They followed the general course of the creek. This sometimes necessitated a long detour around a lagoon, or a swamp, or a hard climb over an elevation or through underbrush.

But still the boys kept on, until suddenly a rider in gray dashed into their path from a patch of forest.

He paused a moment in indecision at sight of the little company. Then the sight of their uniforms seemed to reassure him.

He pulled up his horse and made salute.

Will answered and cried:

"Good-day to you, my friend! I see you are a friend to the Confederacy!"

"The Confederacy needs friends these days," was the reply. "To what regiment do you belong, may I ask?"

"Our regiment is the Forty-first Virginia, known as Captain Joe English's regiment. But we call ourselves the Virginia Grays."

"Oh! You are Captain Will Prentiss?"

"I am."

"Then I am in luck. I have a message for you."

"A message for me?"

"Yes."

"From whom, may I ask?"

"Captain Harper, of North Carolina."

"Captain Harper!" cried Will, "that is the best of news! What has he to say?"

"I am Lieutenant Ward, of his company. I understand you were to meet and co-operate with us in heading off the Union Colonel Fraser."

"That is my understanding."

"Very good! I think though that Captain Harper will need immediate assistance if he is to effect the proposed junction with you. Pray read his message."

Lieutenant Ward placed the paper in Will's hands. Thus it read:

"TO CAPTAIN PRENTISS:

"I have sent Lieut. Ward to find you. I do not know whether he will be able to force his way out of the trap in which we are at present. But if he does and this reaches you, I beg you to come to my assistance at once. Also send a courier to General Beauregard for reinforcements. We are completely hemmed in by a detachment of Wesley's division. We are strongly entrenched in the Kittocton Hills, but we are out of food and water and must capitulate if succor does not reach us soon. I beg you to answer this appeal as quickly as possible. The bearer will pilot you.

(Signed) CAPTAIN JAMES HARPER."

Will read the startling communication with a thrill. It was by no means pleasant news to receive.

All the while he had been counting upon gaining the support of Harper himself. It looked now as if he must go at once to that officer's assistance.

This added to the perils of their situation.

Matters began to look dubious for the young captain of the Virginia Grays. He did not like to fail, but it looked

as if this must be his fate. For he was by no means sanguine of meeting Harper in Kittocton.

He had no doubt that the foe swarmed in the intervening region.

But he turned to Lieutenant Ward:

"This is a serious outlook for us all, Lieutenant. We are not besieged, but we are in constant danger of being surrounded by a superior force."

The lieutenant's face lengthened and there was a tone of supplication in his voice:

"But you will not refuse Harper's appeal!" he cried. "He is a brave officer and the Confederacy cannot well spare him."

"No!" said Will, promptly, "I will not refuse to go to his aid. But it is the difficulty of the undertaking."

"I think I can overtake that."

"You can?"

"Yes! I have come here by a very circuitous but safe route. It will, I believe, enable you to slip the foe which you now are facing."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Will, in surprise, "I am glad to know that. We will place ourselves under your guidance."

"Very good, Captain! I have, however, a favor to beg."

"What is it?"

"For two days I have not tasted food. Can you spare me something to eat?"

"Most certainly!" cried Will. "Our rations are short, but you shall have what we have to give you."

In an instant a score of the Grays stepped forward to offer the hungry man of their rations. He was soon satisfying his hunger, which made him feel better.

Then the route of march was changed.

Ward, much refreshed, led the way at a rapid pace. The Grays, however, were surprised at going back on their tracks.

But this was only for a short distance. Then they went off at a tangent down a wood-grown lane and into the verge of a deep swamp.

Through this swamp was a corduroy road, almost obliterated by the undergrowth. To a casual observer it seemed as if there could be no road there.

But it was there, and men and horses could travel it.

"This is the only break in the Union line surrounding Harper," said Ward. "They never dreamed of anyone traveling it."

"In that case?" asked Will, "why could not Harper's whole company escape by means of it?"

"For the fact that such a general movement would be seen," replied Ward. "One man could get through, but a whole company would be seen."

"Very good! then we shall be seen."

"Oh, yes! But if we come up in the rear of the Yankees they will fall back on either side and that will enable us to reach Harper, and if we are quick enough, make a way for him to get out"

"A capital plan," cried Will. "Forward, Grays!"

The Virginia Grays tramped through the swamp for two hours. Then suddenly Ward, who was in advance, held up his hand.

"Halt!" he said, in a low tone. "Do you see yonder flag?"

The regimental colors of a Union regiment were seen above a thicket about half a mile away.

"It is a Union flag."

"Yes! We are close upon the foe. Harper is just beyond. We must reach him."

"Shall we go ahead?"

"Yes, but slowly, just now. A little ahead the swamp terminates in higher ground. Then look out. We shall be seen."

"You say their numbers are superior?"

"Very much so. But my tactics would be to emerge from the swamp and charge at an angle, thus rolling up their line. While we are doing that Harper can march out."

"A capital scheme!" cried Will. "Just lead the way and give us the word, Lieutenant."

Ward now, sword in hand, forced his horse ahead. Gradually the swamp growth gave way to open country. Soon fields and rail fences, and a distant house were seen.

A mile ahead was an eminence on which stood a church built of stone.

Its steeple had crumbled and the ruins were covered with a mass of ivy. It was a picturesque ruin.

"That is the old Baptist Meeting House," said Ward. "In and above that Harper's boys are entrenched. It would take a large force of infantry to drive them out."

"Have the Union forces no artillery?"

"No; that is where the danger lies. They have sent for a battery and the moment it arrives, poor Harper will be shelled out and then surrender must follow."

"Cheer up!" cried Will, with kindling gaze. "I think we can spoil that game. Just let me go ahead and reconnoiter a little."

"I will go with you."

Will was on foot, and Ward now left his horse. Together they proceeded on foot.

By turning to the south and skirting the woods adjacent to the swamp they came to a slight eminence.

From this they were able to see much of the Union forces. They seemed to be scattered along in a thin line toward the position held by Harper.

According to the best estimate made by Will they numbered a thousand strong. This was a large force for Harper's single company to face.

Critically the young captain of the Grays viewed the situation.

It was not a cheering one.

It was hard for him to see how two companies, barely two hundred strong, were going to give battle successfully to a full regiment of one thousand men.

Moreover, the regiment was only a detachment of General Wesley's division and might be augmented at any moment by double the number.

It was a problem which might well have staggered an older head than that of Will Prentiss, of the Virginia Grays.

Very coolly and critically Will surveyed the situation.

He knew that something had got to be done. Harper could not be left to his fate.

Yet the rescue of Harper was not his mission. It was far more important to effect the rescue of Clifton and Watson.

He believed that this diversion of the Union troops would aid greatly in clearing the way for him to intercept Fraser, who could not now be far from this spot.

But, even as the boy captain was making up his mind to a bit of strategy, a new development arose.

A faint rumble like distant thunder came to the ears of both.

Then Ward grasped Will's arm.

"Look!" he cried. "Do you see that? It is all up with us!"

Even Will Prentiss felt his heart sink.

Both saw, just where the line of woods made a break, a Union battery driven out into the open.

There were four guns and their glittering brass flashed in the sunlight like burnished gold.

The two Confederate officers stood and watched the battery wheel into position. They saw a movement all along the Union line.

Officers galloped back and forth. The guidons of the companies flashed their colors in the sunlight. The guns were unlimbered and the gunners were seen to take their position.

"My soul!" gasped Will, "they are going to shell poor Harper! It is all over with him!"

"Poor Harper!" repeated Ward.

There was a distant sullen boom and a shell went soaring into the air. It fell beyond the church.

The gunners were trying for the range. The next moment another was sent skyward.

Then Will Prentiss set his teeth and drew his sword. The light of daring resolution was in his eyes.

"There is one chance for us, Ward, to save Harper!" he cried. "It is a desperate one. If we succeed, the field is ours. If we fail—then we shall be annihilated."

"I don't believe that one of your Grays will flinch."

"Never! Come on! We will save Harper or die in the attempt."

The two young officers on the run made their way back to the spot where they had left the Grays.

CHAPTER VII.

CHARGING THE BATTERY.

When Will came in sight of his company he whirled his sword in the air and shouted:

"Forward, Grays! Follow me!"

A cheer trembled on the lips of the brave little company. But Fred Randolph cried:

"Silence, boys! the foe will hear us."

Along the edge of the swamp, screened by the growth of shrubs, ran the Grays. On at double quick they went.

The battery had gone into position half a mile away. They were rapidly getting the range of the Confederate position.

Fortunately, the picket line was just outside the line of woods next the swamp, so no alarm was given.

Past the position of the lines of infantry went the Grays.

On at double-quick!

It was a suspenseful time for Will. He knew well the deadly risk of his undertaking.

He knew how easy it would be for the Union line to converge and envelop him if the discovery was made. All depended upon quick action and—good luck.

Luck, so far, seemed certainly to be with the little company.

On, silently, but swiftly, they went.

A determined body of men such as they were, with so much at stake, can get over a half mile very quickly.

Suddenly a sharp alarmed hail went up.

"Halt! Who goes there!"

Then a shot followed. One of the Boys in Gray gave a little start as the leaden pellet cut his cheek. But he went on.

The picket had been posted almost exactly behind the battery. Of course his shot gave the alarm and the startled gunners turned at bay.

There was no time to turn the guns.

The Boys in Gray swept up the little slope like a whirlwind. With a ringing cheer they floated their colors right among the guns.

A hand to hand struggle, fierce and decisive, followed. There was no time to spike the guns. There was hardly time to make any kind of a defense.

The defenders of the guns were hurled back and forced to flee for their lives. It was a complete victory for the plucky little company of Virginia Grays.

The surprise had been complete and absolute. The effect upon the Union forces was most startling.

Of course they had no means of knowing how much of a Confederate force was in their rear. To see the gray line rush out of the woods and seize the battery right in their rear could not help but be intensely demoralizing.

Orders went quickly along the line to about face. A long line of infantry fixed bayonets and swung en echelon to attack and recapture the battery.

All this was swift and decisive.

But Captain Prentiss was ready. So thoroughly drilled was his company that the capture of the battery did not in the least demoralize them.

With the complete possession of the guns, Will lost not a moment.

There were plenty of men in his company well versed

in artillery practice. At once he detailed gun crews and the cannon were swung about to face their former owners.

The caissons were filled and there had not been time in the enemies' retreat to blow them up.

With the detailing of men at the guns, Will caused the rest of his company to deploy as skirmishers in advance.

The guns were loaded with shrapnel and grape and the fire was opened just as the charging line was within two hundred yards.

The result was terrible. Great gaps were cut in the Federal lines. The Grays sent volley after volley into their ranks.

Brave, indeed, was the charge of that regiment in blue. Again and again they rallied and were repulsed.

It almost made Will's heart bleed to see those brave men hurled back and mowed down, knowing that they were really brothers and of kin, and yet foes.

But it was war, hideous, cruel war! He must do his duty by the Confederacy.

And now a new phase presented itself.

Lieutenant Ward had in some way absented himself. The truth was that with the capture of the battery he had broken through the Union line and at once rode full speed to Harper's entrenchments, waving a white flag for safety.

The result was most immediate and telling. Harper ordered his men out of their entrenchments and advanced at the double-quick to smite the rear of the Union force.

It was but two hundred against a thousand. But the battery and the disposition of men was such that there was no chance for anything but victory.

The Union soldiers were driven back into the swamp just as the darkness of night came on.

The second day of the forced march of the Virginia Grays had ended.

And it had certainly ended with an important victory. It was a victory for the Virginia Grays in more than one sense.

They had captured four cannons and all the ammunition. They had repulsed a force of a thousand men.

The moral effect all around was of the most important kind.

The road to High Ridge was cleared for the completion of the forced march to head off Fraser.

Inasmuch as the despatch from General McClellan, authorizing him to advance, had been intercepted, it was more than likely that he was still at Kittocton awaiting orders.

In that case it would be an easy matter, with Harper's aid, to swing quickly over the ridge between him and Nolan's Ferry and overwhelm him.

Then the Grays could march southward before Wesley's pursuit could be organized and get safely back to Manassas.

It was a cleverly planned scheme and truly success seemed to wait upon it. Will was, for the first time, extremely confident.

His meeting with Harper was a joyful one.

The grizzled little Confederate captain fairly wrung Will's hand.

"That was a wonderful feat of yours, Prentiss," he cried. "To think of capturing a battery of four guns, defended by a full regiment, with less than a hundred men under command! Why it's the greatest feat of the war!"

"I am afraid you exaggerate, Captain Harper," said Will. "Every circumstance was in our favor. Don't forget that."

"Was it? It looks to me as if it was all against you. It was pluck and dash and you shall have full credit for it. You saved me all right."

The junction of Harper's men with the Grays made a good sized body of men. There was quite a distinction between the two companies.

Harper's men were rough, unkempt men, some shoeless and almost destitute of any saving grace. Others were lawless and vicious. Such men seldom make good soldiers.

Yet, Harper had wonderful control over these lawless spirits. They would go through fire and water for him.

It was now dark, but Will had no disposition to bivouac. His boys were somewhat exhausted, but he said:

"If we rest now the foe will recover and to-morrow come upon us in overwhelming force. Our only chance is to keep moving. Swift, decisive work will win."

"But the cannon?" asked Fred Randolph. "What of them?"

"We cannot take them with us!"

"Spike them," briefly ordered Will.

"What? Spike them?"

"Yes!"

Will's command was obeyed. So the four guns were put out of commission for the rest of the war.

Then the two companies marched away into the night. The arduous part of the forced march was now encountered.

All that night they kept on, making detours to avoid Federal encampments, floundering in swamps, threading forests and crossing ridges.

When daylight came the Grays dragged themselves over the heights of High Ridge and they were a disreputable looking sight.

They would never have been known for the trig natty little company of the day before.

Their handsome gray uniforms were soiled and frayed. Some had lost their caps; others were covered with mud.

But each man was vigilant, fierce, ready for fight. At that moment they were never more effective for battle.

And they had accomplished the first move in their great game of strategy.

They had crossed the High Ridge and now lay across the line of Fraser's march. That is, provided he had not marched that way already.

With the break of day their line lay across the ridge.

The bivouac was ordered and the exhausted soldier boys threw themselves down and fell asleep on the instant. Only the officers remained awake.

And Will Prentiss, watchful, alert and vigilant as ever, refused to sleep, but paced slowly up and down.

He believed that he already saw the success of his great enterprise.

He could realize what it would mean to turn Fraser's force back, rescue the Confederate prisoners, and get back to Manassas safely.

He was determined to do it at any cost. He could not yield to sleep.

Fred Randolph was in the same mood. But Captain Harper, an older and more staid soldier, calmly laid down and went to sleep also.

Until noon Will allowed his boys to sleep. Then the men fell into line and the roll was called.

Review showed that they were in most excellent trim and ready for action.

It was now in order to locate Fraser and, if possible, engage him. It was known to Will that Fraser's force was superior in numbers to his.

But his men were not trained soldiers. They were green recruits. What was more they were not perfectly equipped.

Will believed that his combined force could defeat them.

It had been at first reported that Fraser had only fifty men with him. This report had misled General Beauregard.

But, as a matter of fact, Fraser had almost half a regiment, or about five hundred men at his command. With such a force as this he was an enemy not to be despised.

So Will knew that he must match tact and strategy against superior numbers. Thus far he had succeeded.

Just where Fraser was located was now the burning question.

Of course there was a chance that he had already passed and had gone on to Nolan's Ferry. But Will believed otherwise.

He employed the usual method of sending out scouts.

These returned with the report which he had expected and desired.

Fraser was only three miles away in a sort of ravine, strongly encamped. To attack him would be a costly thing.

Will knew there was no time to lose. General Wesley might move up from Nolan's Ferry at any moment.

So, as soon as the Grays had partaken of their scant rations, he gave the order to forward march.

The little company set out along the ridge. But they proceeded with caution. They knew that this was needed.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DIVISION OF FORCES.

Of course scouts coming in every moment brought news of the foe. Will was bound to keep himself well posted. He was not disposed to take chances of falling into any sort of a trap.

Captain Harper's plans did not exactly accord with Will's. The veteran captain's plans had been to divide forces and march north and south to strike Fraser on either flank.

But Will objected to this.

"I fear that plan will not work," he said. "Division of forces in the face of an enemy so superior in point of numbers is apt to be most disastrous."

"Theory is all right, but practice is better," said the elder captain, testily. "Theory in war is of little use. Practical experience is what is needed."

"Doubtless," agreed Will. "But theory coupled with common sense is better still."

"Do you mean to insinuate anything?" snapped the captain.

"No more than I have expressed."

"You want to capture Fraser, don't you?"

"No!"

Harper looked annoyed.

"What do you want?"

"Simply to rescue the two prisoners in Fraser's hands. My orders go no further."

"Very good! Allow that! Can you tell me how you are going to do even that, by making a front attack on Fraser?"

"Why not?"

"Easy enough! Don't you see that he can slip away either north or south and you can't head him off? The moment he hears of our advance he'll slip us."

Will was thoughtful a moment. He knew Harper was an old soldier. The boy captain did not wish to assume that he knew it all.

So he finally said:

"How would you divide the forces?"

"I'll go north and try to strike him on the left flank. You swing to the south. You can roll him up onto me, or I'll roll him onto you."

Will was still disposed to regard Harper's tactics as unwise. But he saw that the old captain was very determined.

So he finally said:

"Very well, Harper! It shall be as you say, with only this modification. You go north and I will make a front attack."

"Do as you please," said Harper. "With my boys I am going north."

So it was settled. Will was not on the whole greatly displeased. He had begun to feel that Harper hampered rather than aided him. So he did not demur.

The two companies separated, Harper's men marching away northward. In a short while they were hidden from view.

"What do you think of Harper's move?" asked Fred Randolph.

"It is easy for me to answer that question," declared Will. "I can truly say I don't think much of it."

"Neither do I. To tell the truth I am afraid it may block our plans."

"It simply means that we have got to carry out this game alone," said Will. "Of course, we cannot give battle to Fraser on even ground. We must resort to strategy."

The Virginia Grays marched along the ridge at a good

pace. Not an hour had elapsed after leaving Harper before one of the skirmishers drew the fire of the foe.

The Union troops were located behind a small elevation not a half-mile in front. Will had no doubt it was Fraser's command.

The young captain at once deployed his men and they crept forward to the attack slowly and cautiously.

The fire was kept up steadily, and Will soon became the victim of intense amazement. The foe were falling back.

"What can that mean!" he muttered. "It is not logical for one hundred men to drive six hundred."

The battle was desultory for some time. But finally it began to grow hot. The enemy had reached a point where they had decided to stand their ground.

For a time long range fighting ensued. It was at this juncture that Will felt sorely the need of Harper's men.

With them at his command he would not have hesitated to advance. As it was, he felt that the foe was too strong for him.

After an hour of this sort of fighting there came a change. The foe had evidently tired of waiting for the Virginia Grays to charge, so they had decided to do it themselves.

And on they came with gleaming lines of bayonets. They came down the side of a small eminence and made a proud spectacle as they surged on.

Will was like steel. He gave his orders short and resolute. Like a machine in the accuracy of their action his men closed up and massed to meet the charge.

A destructive volley was poured into the ranks of the oncoming foe. It for an instant only checked them.

Then they came on faster than ever. But Will gave the order again to fire. As fast as one rank fired another stepped forward to take its place.

Thus a continuous and deadly leaden hail met the charging soldiers. Nothing human could stand up before that fire.

The result was that the Union line seemed to melt, to collapse and drift away. That was the supreme moment.

"Grays, ready!" shouted Will. "Fix bayonets! Charge! double-quick!"

In an instant the Grays leaped up from the ground and plunged ahead. They scattered the foe like chaff.

They swept over the summit and into the Union camp. Tents and equipage of all sorts had been abandoned.

The memory of that charge lived long in the minds of those who took part in it thereafter. Down into the deserted camp they went.

Fraser's men were routed and his camp captured. Though it was not known at the moment, it was afterward discovered that Fraser's force had been divided, over half of his men having fallen back several miles to another post.

So that the Grays did not meet his full force. But their victory was none the less of great importance.

Fraser's camp was captured. Even his papers had been left behind.

But the prisoners could not be found. What could it mean? Had the wily Union colonel spirited them away?

This was a problem. Will was bitterly disappointed. The real object of his mission had not been accomplished. What could it mean?

Where were the prisoners?

The region about was scoured. Fraser's troops had retired precipitately, so it could not be assumed that the prisoners had been taken with them.

But Will's blood was up.

He was determined to head off the game at any cost. One of the wounded Union soldiers was brought to him.

Will talked to him gently a while. Then, step by step, he extorted from him the true story of Fraser's movement.

"When Fraser found that you were going to beat us," said the wounded soldier, "he took the two prisoners, and with a body guard, left us and started for Lake Kittocton. It is simply an enlargement of Kittocton Creek. There he expects to find boats and proceed on down to the Potomac and thence to Washington with the prisoners."

Will saw that Fraser's one plan now was to get his prisoners safely to Washington.

His command was scattered and he had adopted the safest and best method of reaching Nolan's Ferry and General Wesley's headquarters.

This convinced the young captain that Fraser had in some manner got the order from McClellan to go to Nolan's Ferry.

Naturally Will thought of Meldon.

There was little doubt in his mind but that Meldon, the traitor and spy, after his escape, had gone directly to Fraser's camp at High Ridge.

Will bit his lips.

If he could have laid hands on Meldon at that moment it is possible that he would have ordered him shot.

The miscarrying of his plans he owed wholly to this scoundrel. It was unfortunate, indeed, that he had escaped.

There was but one thing to do and that was to give pursuit.

Will lost no time.

As soon as he became satisfied that this was the state of affairs, he cared for his wounded and then set out on the continuation of his forced march.

He learned that there was a way of cutting across the country to reach Lake Kittocton perhaps before Fraser.

It was now a question of a hustling and rapid march.

Fortunately, the capture of Fraser's camp had resulted in the finding of a liberal quantity of food supplies.

The Virginia Grays were glad to fill their knapsacks with this food and felt much refreshed thereby.

Will and Fred Randolph led the way with tireless stride. Right across rough country the Grays went. Over rail fences, across corn fields, through woods and meadows, never turning out for anything.

The Grays hardly presented the neat appearance they had at marching from Manassas, the hard service they had

seen had bedaubed their uniforms and rusted their muskets. But it had only added to their fighting efficiency.

On went that grim little company fearless of danger, yet always keen and on the alert.

Finally, almost as the day was ending, they came in sight of the glimmer of water.

"Lake Kittocton!" cried one of the Grays. "I know it well."

"Hurrah!" cheered the boys.

Forward now they pushed rapidly. In a short while they came out upon the banks of the creek.

They followed it to the enlargement which made the lake. Here they saw a small flatboat being propelled along the shore by an aged colored man.

Will rushed down to the water's edge.

"Come here, Pompey!" he cried, authoritatively, "I want to speak with you!"

The old darkey who had been engaged in the peaceful pursuit of fishing, began to tremble and gasp.

"Fo' de Lor', Massa, I'se only a po' cullud man. I'se got mah freedom papahs, sah."

"I don't care what you've got," cried Will imperatively. "Come ashore!"

Pleading and whining, the old fellow turned his craft in to the shore.

He clambered out and crouched before the young captain. Will spoke in a kinder tone.

"Have no fear, Pompey! We are not going to hang you, if you tell the truth."

"Fo' de Lor', Massa, I done tole yo' anyfing yo' ask!"

"That is not what I want! I want the truth."

"Youse get de troof, sah! Dat's my word, sah, on mah honah!"

At this some of the boys could not help a laugh. But Will went on seriously:

"Pompey, we're looking for some Yankees who have a couple of our men as prisoners. Have you seen them?"

The colored man's face changed expression. He hesitated a moment.

Will drew his sword and put the point to the old man's bosom.

"Out with it!" he cried. "No misplaced affection for the Yankees will save you. Let us have the truth."

"Yas, yas, Massa! I done saw dem!" cried the old negro, excitedly.

"Yes, into the lake?"

"Yes, sah!"

"Good! Did they keep on?"

"No, sah; dey make camp ober dere, sah, on dat odder side ob de lake!"

At this point the lake was exceedingly narrow. Will looked across and by keenly scrutinizing the shore he saw the hull of a flatboat pushed in among the green growth of the bank.

"All right, Pompey," he said. "Do you know that they are over there now?"

"Yes, Massa! I done believe dey is!"

"Very good! Here is a Mexican dollar for you. Keep right on fishing and say nothing to anyone."

The old negro's eyes danced as he took the silver coin.

"Tank yo', Massa! Yo' is good to dis po' ole brack man. Yo' is a genelman!"

"I am a Virginian," said Will, proudly. "No better and no worse than any other man. Now Pompey, be off with you."

The negro pushed out in his boat. He kept along the shore fishing unconcernedly.

Will and his boys had all the while been hidden by a leafy screen on the shore.

They did not believe that those on the other shore had seen them, even were they on the watch.

A consultation was now held.

"Well!" exclaimed Fred Randolph, "we have run our game down. Only the lake lies between us!"

"Very true! But that is something."

"Shall we go back and ford the creek and make a circuit to surprise them?"

"It would take too long," demurred Will, "by that time they would have changed their position."

"Do you believe it?"

"I feel sure of it!"

"Then what is to be done?"

Will was silent a moment. He knew that it was a problem which required careful consideration.

"Well," he said finally, "my plan is to keep on down the lake and lie in wait where it narrows into the creek again."

"That is all right, but——"

"What?"

"Supposing they change their course and do not go that way?"

Will was thoughtful. He appreciated the possibility. It was not a time to take chances.

"We'll do the best we can," he said.

"I propose that we leave a squad here and send another around the lake."

"Very well; but I shall send them around the lower end."

"Of course!"

Arrangements were quickly made. Half a dozen of the Grays remained to keep watch of the boat across the lake.

Will and the rest of the company started along the shore of the lake.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RESCUE.

In that moment Will felt jubilant.

He fixed his gaze upon the negro and went on sternly:

"Where did you see them?"

"Dey done come down de creek, Massa. Dey come down on a flatboat!"

They kept well back from the water in the cover of clumps of trees and bushes.

Finally they crept up a little eminence which sloped down to the shore. A rail fence intervened. Below was a little sandy landing place.

A path led up over the eminence and into the undergrowth beyond. It doubtless led to a distant plantation house.

Will and his Grays paused a moment here and surveyed the lake.

As they did so suddenly Fred Randolph gave a little cry of surprise.

"By Jove! do you see that, Will?"

The boy captain did see it. The flatboat had pushed out from the leaf-fringed shore opposite.

There were six occupants.

Two men sat in the stern with muskets. Two were at the oars. These four wore uniforms of blue.

But in the middle of the boat sat two men with their arms bound securely. They wore Confederate gray.

There was no doubt but that they were the captured Confederates, Clifton and Watson. One of the men at the oars was an officer.

His uniform seemed to be that of a colonel. There seemed no reason to doubt that he was Fraser himself.

"They are coming across here!" whispered Will. "By jingo! they are coming right to us, Fred."

Indeed, this seemed the case.

The landing place seemed their objective point. They were rowing easily.

Naturally, Will Prentiss decided to remain on the spot. He disposed his men in the bushes back of the rail fence.

Then all waited eagerly.

A man was sent to bring in the squad left on the shore above. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

And nearer came the boat in which were their birds. Will crouched behind the fence and waited.

As the boat drew nearer the voices of those on board could be distinguished. The officer in the bow was speaking.

"The best thing we can do is to make our way over to Colonel Taylor's plantation. Major Meldon will meet us there and tell us what to do."

"That's right, Colonel! The major is a slick article. He could fool Old Nick himself, I believe," said one of the soldiers in the stern.

The two prisoners did not speak.

"At that, he's the biggest scoundrel unhung," rejoined Fraser. "Have you heard that he has captured a beautiful young girl who is known as a Confederate spy?"

"No! Who is she?"

"I believe she is the daughter of an officer on Beauregard's staff. Her name, I think, is Prentiss."

"What is he going to do with her? You can't hang a woman."

"That is true! But he proposes to take her to himself, I believe. He has fallen dead in love with her!"

"The deuce! She'll never have him if I am any judge of a southern girl's character."

"Not willingly! He expects to tame her."

"Bad business! The man who fools with a woman gets the worst of it."

"So I think!"

"Is she at Colonel Taylor's house?"

"Oh, no! He has sent her up into the hills back of Nolan's Ferry under the guard of old Sam Hague and his wife Meg. They are of the moonshiner class, you know."

"I say, that's too bad; I'll call Meldon down for that when I see him."

"He'll run you through if you speak of it."

"Will he?" exclaimed Fraser, with a shrug of his shoulders, "there are men in the Union army who can handle a sword as well as my friend Meldon."

"They say he trained abroad. Does anybody know much about the chap? He is a mystery to me. Some say he is no more of an American than I am a Chinaman. I have heard that he was once on the staff of the French Emperor. Also some say that he is an Italian of high rank."

"I don't know nor care who nor what he is. Certainly he is a coward to turn his hand against a woman."

"Right, Colonel! We'll stand by you there."

All this conversation was heard word for word by Will Prentiss. The effect upon him can hardly be imagined.

To know that his beloved sister Nellie was in the power of an unscrupulous villain like Meldon, seemed more than he could bear.

He had all he could do to restrain himself from leaping up and denouncing the scoundrel, even as Fraser had. His respect for the Union colonel was profound.

Nellie in the power of Meldon! How had it happened?

To Will it seemed hard to explain. His only logical theory was that Meldon, after his escape, had gone to Nolan's Ferry and to General Wesley's headquarters.

Then he had doubtless set out to warn Fraser. In some way he had come across Nellie, who was trying to reach Manassas. He had captured her, and at once becoming enamored of her beauty, had adopted the villainous scheme of forcing her to wed him.

Will had heard of the mountain bandit and illicit distiller, Sam Hague, and of his wife Meg. A prisoner in their hands, Nellie's fate was not one to be envied.

His first thought, of course, was of his duty to General Beauregard in the rescue of Watson and Clifton.

Then, at any cost, he would go to the rescue of his sister.

And if he met Major Meldon face to face, it was hard to tell what the result might be. Will did not feel that he would be inclined to give quarter.

But he was compelled now to set those thoughts aside.

The boat was now quite close to the shore. The Union colonel sprung up in the bow and leaped ashore.

He pulled the bow of the boat up on the sands. Will saw the situation just as it was. The time for action had come.

The two prisoners were in charge of a guard of four Union soldiers.

As the boat touched the shore, Will Prentiss, sword and pistol in hand, leaped the rail fence, followed by the Virginia Grays.

"Scoundrel!" he cried. "You cannot escape. You are our prisoners!"

Colonel Fraser, aghast, turned and stared at the Confederate uniforms. The other Union soldiers had half cocked their muskets.

The two prisoners turned their faces with an expression of utter joy.

There was no use to resist.

This, Colonel Fraser could see. All that he could do was to turn and say:

"You have got us, gentlemen! We are your prisoners, without a struggle."

"Colonel Fraser?" asked Will, touching his cap.

"That is my name," replied the colonel, returning the salute.

"I am Captain Will Prentiss, of the Virginia Grays."

"Pleased to meet you, Captain Prentiss," said the Union Colonel, "though I would rather have met you under opposite conditions."

"Fortune has given me the advantage," said Will. "For my part I would prefer to meet you on brotherly terms of friendship which should exist between the two parts of our country."

"Well said, Captain!" exclaimed the colonel. "It is not your fault nor mine that the country is at war to-day."

"Assuredly not! We can only hope that it will soon terminate."

"I have to turn over to you our prisoners, Captain. They are of no further use to us now."

Will ordered the prisoners' bonds cut and shook hands with them.

"This is an unexpected joy, Captain Prentiss," cried Major Clifton. "We expected we were booked for a long term at Arlington."

"General Beauregard will be anxious to see both of you at once," declared Will. "I understand you have important information for him."

"Important if it has not already lost its value," said Lieutenant Watson. "My papers are in the possession of Colonel Fraser."

"They are in my knapsack," said the colonel, courteously. "As a prisoner of war they, as well as myself, become your property."

Will recovered the papers and maps and gave them to Watson. Then a consultation was held as to what it was best to do.

The Virginia Grays had accomplished the mission upon which they had been sent. The ordinary routine rule of duty would have demanded that they return at once to General Beauregard and report.

But Will Prentiss could not think of leaving Nellie Prentiss to her fate, and for once was decided to transgress the stern dictates of discipline and go in quest of her.

CHAPTER X.

MAJOR MELDON AGAIN.

Arrangements were quickly made for a new plan of action.

Will detailed thirty men of his company under the command of Sergeant Joe Spotswood to take the prisoners to Manassas and act as escort for the two rescued officers.

The rest of his company he marshalled as a relief party to go to the rescue of Nellie. It was now evening.

It was necessary to locate the hiding place of Sam Hague and his wife Meg, in the hills of Kittocton. But first, if Meldon was really at Colonel Taylor's plantation, so near at hand, it would be a good move to, if possible, effect his capture.

So Will decided to go thither first.

Colonel Fraser had expected to meet him there and it was fairly certain that he would be there.

The detail with the prisoners now set out for Manassas. Sergeant Spotswood was a shrewd fellow and knew the country well. There was no doubt that he would be able to take the party through.

Will and Fred bade their comrades good-bye. Then they parted.

Will took the path, sword in hand, which led to Colonel Taylor's.

For a mile or more it led through the brush and woods. Finally it came out into an open region.

The plantation buildings were plainly seen. In the yard were tethered several horses.

These bore saddle cloths with the stamp of the U. S. A. upon them. Will at once guessed that some Union officers had stopped there.

That Meldon was one of them there was no doubt. So the young captain went ahead with renewed confidence.

He cautiously deployed his men to surround the plantation as nearly as possible.

Then, with Fred and half a dozen of the Grays he walked boldly up to the house.

On the porch sat an aged negro.

He started up in alarm at sight of the Confederate uniforms. In a moment Will had the point of his sword turned toward him.

"Silence, you black rascal," he cried. "Who is in the house?"

"Massy Lordy!" whined the slave, "I jes' dunno, sah! I'se a po' ole brack man——"

"Look here! No lies now! Is Major Meldon in there?"

The words had barely left Will's lips when out through the door onto the porch stepped a familiar figure.

"How are you, Prentiss! I am glad to see you! Shake hands!"

It was Meldon, in a handsome new blue uniform. He was as cool and complacent as could be. In fact, his manner was distinctly warm and friendly.

"You scoundrel!" exclaimed Will, shaking his sword. "I have all I can do to keep from cutting you down."

"What? a defenceless man!" said Meldon, with a bland smile. "Oh, no! I know you'll never do that."

"It would be your just deserts. But no! I have a better fate for you. You shall hang for your cowardly crimes."

"Oh! You are going to hang me, eh?"

"It is too good a fate for you!"

"Indeed! I am sorry you are disposed to look upon me so harshly. Really, I am not a bad fellow at all. Only think, Prentiss! I am likely to become your brother-in-law!"

Will could control himself no longer. With a quick step forward he dealt the scoundrel a terrific slap across the face.

For one instant Meldon turned purple. His hand went to the butt of his pistol in his belt. But he recovered his composure the very next instant.

"You vile hound!" hissed Will. "Don't dare to couple my sister's name with yours! I will kill you!"

"Pshaw! listen to reason, Prentiss. You are too violent! I have killed a man for less than that. But I cannot harm you for your sweet sister's sake!"

Will was so furious that he became almost nerveless. He stood still and glared at the scoundrel.

"Now be calm, Prentiss," went on Meldon, blandly. "You and I might as well have an understanding. We can't afford to quarrel with each other. No, don't get violent! It is very necessary that we be friends."

"Seize him and bind him!" cried Will, furiously. "He is a murderer! He killed poor Corporal Stone in the most cowardly manner! We will hang him!"

"Back!" cried Meldon, in a melodramatic fashion, as the Grays were about to seize him. "Stop and think a moment, Prentiss. Harm me and you send your sister to death."

There was a fiendish malevolent intonation in the fellow's voice which caused Will a chill of fear.

In an instant the dread possibility of which the villain hinted came to him.

He saw that he was really in the power of this dark scoundrel. He knew the cool and crafty villain too well.

He knew that threats would be of no avail. Meldon would snap his fingers at them.

The villain had so arranged matters that he held the upper hand as his declaration quickly showed.

"Hang me if you will, Prentiss. But the moment word of my death reaches Sam Hague, that moment your sister dies. It is my compact with him."

"Now you know why I do not fear you. Why, I have thus allowed you to make me your prisoner. I could easily have escaped when you first appeared here. But I knew that you would not harm me."

"You scoundrel!" gritted Will. "Don't think that you can carry out your dark game. I shall thwart it."

Meldon smiled in a cold way.

"How will you do that?"

Will was speechless. He could not reply. He could only

glare at the villain. Again Meldon smiled in his suave way.

"Let us talk reason!" he said, complacently. "You are a brave young officer, Prentiss. You came of a good Virginia family. You have for a sister the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"I love her, and I love her madly. I am only a poor soldier of fortune. I am going to tell you that I am not an American, but a foreigner. My name is not Meldon. My sword I have offered to the cause of the Confederacy first. It was declined and I then bestowed it upon the Union. But I am a soldier and I shall win high promotion. The North will triumph. You proud families of the South will be ruined. You will then need the strong arm of a friend, and that friend I will be. Your sister will be happy as my wife. Give me your hand and let us be brothers."

With speechless rage Will stood glaring at the fellow. He could have struck him down without compunction. But it was true that he dared not do it.

His insolence was unbearable. Yet Will saw that his sister's life was at stake. Something must be done.

He quickly decided what this should be.

"Bind his arms!" he said to his men. "He shall remain a prisoner. In the meantime Kittocton shall be scoured for trace of the hiding place of Hague. And when he is caught he shall hang beside this murderer."

Meldon made no objection when his arms were bound. He only smiled in a coldly sarcastic way.

The officers who were with Meldon at Taylor's were a lieutenant and a captain of the Union Army. They had managed to slip out and escape.

But Will interviewed Colonel Taylor in a straightforward fashion. The colonel was supposed to be a sympathizer with the Confederacy.

But the harboring of Union officers in his house would seem to imply that he was not altogether sincere in his profession.

Leaving Taylor's plantation with his prisoner just as darkness was falling, Will and the Virginia Grays started on their long march to the Kittocton Hills.

Will had little to guide him. One of the boys knew the country fairly well, but the hills were not known to him. The hiding place of Hague had never yet been found.

For some hours they marched on to the northward. Meldon, who marched with them, was cool and self-possessed.

When midnight came they had reached the base of the hills. Then Will called a halt and a bivouac was made.

The boys were much exhausted.

With the forced marches and hard fighting of the past three days, they were indeed well used up.

They were glad to make bivouac, and some of them dropped down from sheer fatigue and slept where they fell.

Will was himself fatigued, but he only indulged in an hour's sleep. Then he arose and took a musket in his hand and marched to the line of picket guard.

The guard saluted and asked:

"Is all well, Captain?"

"All is well!" replied Will. "I am going up into the hills a little way above. Keep your eyes open for bushwhackers."

"It is said they are quite thick up here, sir."

"Yes! be constantly on your guard. I shall return soon."

"Are you going alone? Shall I not call out the guard?"

"No!" replied Will. "Say nothing about my going."

"Very well, sir."

But just then a footstep sounded beside Will. A dark figure stood before him and saluted.

"Beg pardon, Captain. But can't I go with you?"

Will gave a great start.

"Is that you, Corporal Payton?" he asked.

"It is, sir."

Will hesitated a moment. He had thought of going alone upon his mission. But he knew how fraught with danger it was.

He knew Payton to be a man of great courage and physical strength. He was discreet and tactful also.

"All right Payton," he said, with sudden impulse, "you shall go along, too."

"I thank you, Captain."

"Do you know where I am going?"

"I think I can guess, sir."

"Well?"

"You are going up into the hills to look for Sam Hague on your own hook."

"Just so. Orders have been left for the company to remain here until my return. I have left them in written form upon the table in my tent. I may be going into a death trap. The hills are full of bushwhackers and we may lose our lives."

"A man can die but once!"

"All right, Sam. You give me courage."

Will again cautioned the sentry. Then he and Payton slipped away into the gloom. Thrilling adventures were before them.

In a few moments they had found a mountain path leading up through a deep ravine.

They followed this for some ways. Suddenly Payton grasped Will's arm.

"Wait, Captain!" he whispered.

"What is it?"

"Look yonder! Can you see it?"

Will looked and gave a start. Up in the air, as it seemed, against the dark side of the hill, a light flitted and flickered in an irregular erratic way.

or will-o'-the-wisp. But closer investigation convinced him that it was nothing of the kind.

There it hung, like a fiery eyeball, in the hillside.

This was all the more strange as that side of the hill was exceedingly precipitous and hardly the spot for a lantern to be carried.

Suddenly the light vanished.

Its vanishing was accompanied by a peculiar odd sound like the snapping of a twig.

The two Confederates stood for some while longer gazing at the spot where it had been.

Then it reappeared. This time it remained visible but a few moments.

For some time they watched it, and in that time it reappeared and disappeared many times.

Will was quite mystified. To him it seemed to hold a strange significance.

"I believe that light has some connection with Hague," he said. "I tell you, Payton, I am going to investigate it."

"I'm with you, Captain."

Will had left his sword behind. He carried only a musket and pistols.

They now plunged down into the ravine with the purpose of crossing to the opposite side.

This brought them to the banks of a brawling brook.

It was but a few moments' work to cross this. Just overhead against the side of the cliff was the spot where the strange disappearing light had been seen.

But it was beyond their reach two hundred feet up the jagged precipitous rock wall of the cliff.

What was to be done?

Will was in a quandary.

But the young captain of the Grays was of a tenacious temperament. He was not disposed to give up an enterprise.

"We've got to get up there somehow, Payton," he said. "I am going to know what the mystery of that light is."

"Give me a lift, Captain," whispered Payton, "I think I can climb up there."

"Use great care!"

"I will, sir!"

The agile young Virginian mounted from one spur of rock to another like a mountain chamois. But he was able only to scale to the height of fifty feet.

Then he was compelled to stop. It was a keen disappointment.

For some moments the two young Confederates considered the situation. Then Payton whispered:

"Nobody without wings could reach that spot, Captain. If any human being is responsible for that light they got there from some other quarter."

"I am willing to agree with you," said Will. "Let us go up the ravine a ways."

Then suddenly a startling sound came to their ears. It nearly froze the blood in their veins.

It was a wild, unearthly scream of agony and terror. It caused the two young Confederates an awful start.

CHAPTER XI.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

For some moments Will and Payton watched the curious light. The young captain of the Grays was interested. At first he was inclined to regard it as an ignis fatuus,

"Great ginger!" gasped Payton. "What on earth was that?"

"Whoever uttered that cry was in fearful terror," said Will. "It was a feminine voice."

A cold chill of horror had settled down upon Will's heart.

He knew the reputation of the Hagues. He knew that many a luckless stranger had been lured into their abode in the hills and never were heard of again.

He was sick and half faint as he reflected that this might have been the voice of his sister.

Then Will grew calm and keen. All his nerve returned.

He knew that if he was to save her it could only be by the coolest of work. Patience could accomplish it. Nothing else.

Up the ravine they now cautiously climbed.

For a hundred yards they kept on thus. Then an odd thing happened.

Payton's foot slipped and with a splash he went into the brook. The water was only up to his knees and he easily scrambled out.

But as he did so he held an object in his hands.

"I have found something, Will," he said, as he shook himself like a wet dog. "Have you got a match?"

"Yes."

Will struck a match and by its faint blaze Payton held up a rope. One end he held, the other end was in the brook.

"A rope!" exclaimed Will. "What is at the other end of it?"

"Let us see!"

Payton applied his strength to the rope and pulled on it. An object came slowly up out of the water.

"A fish weir!" exclaimed Will, as he struck another match. "Now we know that we are near some mountain abode. Probably that of Hague."

"Wait a moment! Let us see how many fish are in the weir."

The structure of wood and wire was hauled out and Payton put his hand into it. It encountered something cold and slimy.

But that slimy object was not a fish. It was a bottle.

In the weir were a dozen other bottles, all securely corked and waxed. They were filled with a good species of whiskey.

It was a hiding place for the illicit whiskey manufactured by the mountaineers. Will knew at once that he was near Hague's abiding place.

The discovery was therefore important. Will realized the necessity of very great caution.

He knew that Hague was like a fox and to track him was equally as difficult. The next thing in order was to find other evidence which might lead them even to the very abode of the outlaw.

It was now certain that the light on the cliffside was connected with the illicit still.

Will and Payton felt encouraged. They knew that they were gradually getting nearer to the place they sought.

Just then a startling sound came to their ears.

It was a footstep. Some person was coming down the ravine.

Quickly they stepped back into the shadows. A dark figure passed them.

Will could have touched the unknown. He could have rapped him on the head easily. But he forebore.

The unknown went to the bank of the stream and plunged an arm into the current. Then an oath escaped him.

He had discovered the weir on the bank. In an instant he was upon his feet like a cat, with drawn pistols in his hands.

The moonshiner knew that his still was in danger of discovery. For aught he knew the foe were about him.

Will acted quickly.

"Hands up, you scoundrel!" he said sharply. "If you make a move you are a dead man!"

The unknown did not make a move. But a shrill cat-like call escaped his lips and in an instant men swarmed from the thicket on all sides.

Will and Payton were surrounded so quickly that resistance would have been useless. Lights flashed and they were hustled into a ring of the fiercest men they had ever seen in their lives.

Bushwhackers and moonshiners they were. The poor white trash of the Blue Ridge region.

Men of lawless habits and daring spirits. Men taught to fear nothing; to hunt and to kill.

It is hardly necessary to say that in that moment Will and Payton did not deem their lives worth a straw.

"Who be you 'uns!" shouted the leader of the gang, a round-shouldered giant with heavy cruel features. "What be you doin' hyer? Don't yer lie ter us! Ye've—hello, boys! they wear ther gray!"

"We are Confederate soldiers, and have lost our way," said Will. "We mean no harm."

Keen knives had bristled above the two young Confederates. But the sight of their uniforms had somehow curbed the murderous spirit of the bushwhackers.

The average bushwhacker has always been known to be credited with no soul. They are generally believed to have known no difference between blue and gray.

Whatever they could get their rapacious grasp upon they would hold, no matter what it was.

But Sam Hague, for the stoop-shouldered giant was he, seemed impressed quite singularly by the fact that these were Confederate soldiers.

His reason for sparing their lives was not evident just then.

It became so later.

"Cast the lantern light up hyar an' let me see ther faces," said the bushwhacker chief.

He peered into Will's face and nodded.

He thrust his knife back into his belt. He turned to his followers and said:

"Bring 'em along! I've got use fer 'em."

Hague's word was law. He was instantly obeyed. The two young Confederates were marched away in his rear.

Will and Payton knew that they were in a desperate fix.

They could see no way out of it at present. The best they could do was simply to wait and watch and hope.

No man who had ever got into Sam Hague's clutches had ever been known to escape.

Before the war he had been distinctly an outlaw and a desperado. He was feared by all classes.

Since the war he had won distinction as a bushwhacker. The generals of both armies had offered large rewards for his head.

Up the ravine in the darkness the two young prisoners were marched.

Under the black arches of overhanging trees, through cuts in the rocky hills, between high walls of rock, until finally a great aperture yawned before them.

It was a cavern in the solid rock. Into it they were led.

At that moment Will was bound to recall the inscription over the reputed entrance to Inferno:

"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!"

For some distance through a dark, rocky passageway they were led. Then they came upon a sort of pocket, or deep hole in the hills. Its sides were precipitous and it could only be entered through the passage they had just traversed.

A dozen men lay about in blankets, most of them asleep. But Will's gaze did not rest long upon them.

It wandered about the place, and he saw at the other end of the pocket an opening in the cliff wall.

It was perfectly round, and through it he could see the

sky. He guessed truly that this was the aperture in which the signal light was displayed which had so puzzled Payton and himself.

But now an astounding revelation was in store for him.

Hague, the bushwhacker chief, came up and led him away.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DUEL—CONCLUSION.

Will was led into a side passage leading from the pocket by Hague. In a few moments they came into a sort of rough-walled cavern chamber.

Here Hague motioned him to a seat, there being a few rickety chairs in the place. Several of the bushwhackers, armed with muskets, stood about the chamber.

"Now, boss," said Hague, in his gross way, "who are ye an' what brought ye into these 'ere parts? Tell the truth an' it may go well with yer, fer I've a weakness fer ther gray uniform. Lie to me an' you'll never see ther sunrise."

"What shall I tell you?" asked Will, in a quiet way.

"Who are ye?"

"I am an officer in Beauregard's Army."

"What's yer regiment?"

"Joe English's Virginia Regiment."

"What's yer name?"

Here was the rub. Will was averse to giving his real name for many reasons. In the first place, if the bushwhacker chief knew that he was Will Prentiss, of the Virginia Grays, he knew his life would be worthless.

"My name is Will Adams," he said, giving his middle name, and thus escaping the necessity of an absolute lie.

But Hague seemed incredulous.

"That's not yer name!" he declared.

"Yes it is!"

"I know better!"

"I think I ought to know better than you."

"You've lied to me, just as I thought you would. I'll prove it to ye!"

Hague snapped his fingers. Footsteps sounded behind Will. Into the cavern marched two bushwhackers.

Between them was a pallid young girl. Her eyes were flashing courage and defiance though.

Will looked at her and in an instant a cry of joy escaped the lips of both.

"Nell! 'tis you!"

"Oh, Will!"

A light of sardonic triumph shone in the eyes of Hague. He stepped between the brother and sister.

"Take her back!" he commanded. "That is all. I knew the young cub would lie ter me. So you are Captain Prentiss, of the Virginia Grays, eh?"

"That is my full name," said Will, with dignity. "My name is Will Adams Prentiss."

"I see! That is a mighty clever trick," sneered Hague, "but ye didn't make anything by it. If ye only knew it ye'd have done much better to have come out straight an' told me the truth."

"Well," said Will, coldly, "what are you going to do with me?"

"Do with ye?" snorted the brute. "I'm goin' ter hang ye!"

"Very well!" said Will, quietly. "Kindly make it a quick job."

Hague looked at the brave young captain and gave a brutish laugh.

"You won't talk that way when ye feel the halter on yer neck," he said. "I've seen ther best of 'em sicken and cry when ther time comes."

"I ask only one favor of you. If there is a spark of manhood in you, you will not refuse it."

"What is that?"

"Do what you will with me, but spare my sister Nell. Send her safely back to our people."

There was an earnest manliness in the appeal which might have moved the hardest of hearts.

But the bushwhacker was evidently devoid of such an organ. He only shrugged his shoulders and said jeeringly:

"She's not my property! She belongs to another!"

"You hound!" gritted Will, losing his temper. "You and Meldon make a brave pair!"

"Meldon will be here soon," said Hague, with a leer. "I will let you settle your affair with him then."

"I would ask no higher privilege than to meet him in personal encounter," cried Will. "He is a black murderer and deserves death."

"Ye shall hev the chance," said Hague. Then he left the cavern.

Will and Payton, with their arms bound, sat on a rock and were plunged into deep dejection.

Certainly their case looked hopeless. Never in his life had Will Prentiss felt so discouraged before.

"Payton," he said, slowly, "we are in a hopeless box. I at least will never get out of it."

"I am just as bad off."

"Well, not exactly. I am the special mark of Meldon. There was a strange significance in Hague's words when he spoke of Meldon. Did you notice it?"

"Well, yes! But I fail to understand it."

"Let me tell you! There is no doubt that the bushwhackers have tried or will try to rescue Meldon. We left Fred and all asleep at the encampment. It is possible that Hague and his cunning wolves have managed to creep in and free Meldon. If so, we are in a bad way!"

Payton gave a start.

"I recall it all now," he said. Then he was checked by a new and startling development.

Into the cavern again stalked Hague. In the dim lantern light the true expression of his face could not be seen.

But Will thought it was of a fiendish exultant cast.

"Well, Captain Prentiss," said the villain, with a sweeping bow, "you made me a request a short while ago. Now I can tell you that Sam Hague, bad as he is, appreciates a bit of chivalry. I have decided to, in part, yield to your proposition."

Will's face lit up.

"Do you refer to my sister?" he asked.

"Wall, yes."

"Now I shall believe that every spark of manhood is not wanting in you!" cried Will. "Spare her and I will go to my death with a free heart."

"It's a pooty sure thing you'll go to your death," said Hague, "but if ye want yer sister to live, ye want to hang onto life, too."

Will was puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"Wall, I'll tell ye," said Hague, as he faced Will with a grin, "Meldon has come back!"

"Meldon?"

"Yas, a couple of our scouts knocked over yer picket guard an' crept into yer camp an' brought Meldon out."

"And—he is here?"

"Yas!"

Hague snapped his fingers. Into the cavern chamber walked Meldon, triumphant and leering.

"Hello, Prentiss!" he cried. "You and I seem to enjoy a kaleidoscopic career. Now you are up and I am down, and vice versa. Have you decided yet to compromise and accept me as a brother-in-law?"

"I ask only the privilege to meet you on even terms," said Will. "I hope and pray that time may come!"

"It has come," cried Hague, with a brutish laugh. "Hey! all you men come in an' see ther fun. Ther Hungarian an' ther Yankee will give an exhibition. Bring out ther gal, there!"

The next moment Nellie Prentiss was led into the room. Meldon, astonished and puzzled, looked at Hague.

"What's the matter?" he demanded, angrily. "What are you up to?"

"Haw! haw! haw!" laughed the brute. "It's yer chance now, Meldon. You want ther pooty gal an' her brother wants her. So, we're goin' to give yer both a chance. Ye kaint say old Hague ain't square an' generous fer once."

"What are you driving at, you fool?" hissed Meldon, angrily.

"Let him go free and give him a knife or a sabre, boys," cried Hague to the two men who held Will. "Ye've got to fight for ther gal, Meldon. Ther winner gets her, an' ther loser hangs. Do ye understand, Prentiss? I give my word that if you run Meldon through I'll set ye and yer friend an' ther gal free. I'll put ye out on ther trail to yer camp an' ye kin get back to Manassas as quick as ye please, fer ther Yankees are comin' up this way soon, ten thousand strong."

Meldon caught at Hague's proposition with sudden alacrity. His evil face grew inflamed with delight.

"Sabres!" he cried. "That is the weapon. Sabres, till I crop his ears!"

Then he stepped up and very deliberately spat in Will's face. The young captain of the Grays was white with rage.

He would have hurled himself at Meldon, but the bushwhackers restrained him. Hague roared with brutish laughter and coming close to Will, whispered:

"I hope yer win! Pink him fer old Virginny! Give him ther point."

Will caught the sabre and tested its point. He was determined to kill the traitor and murderer if he could.

Meldon showed a powerful wrist and brought his blade up with a swish. Will stepped forward and the blades clashed.

The sabre drill is a mere form. A fight with sabres is quite another matter.

Strength of wrist and quickness of recovery are necessary. Will faced his foe without a particle of fear.

Nellie Prentiss was pale as a sheet. But her face was rigid and her courage was shown in every line.

"Now!" cried Hague. "Ready! cross blades! Cut him down!"

In dazzling crescendo the Hungarian's blade came down through the air. But it was met with a cool turn of the wrist and Will sent a keen thrust over the other's guard.

Meldon just avoided it and looked surprised. He grew angry and rained blows at the young Virginian.

But they were parried with ease. Will was cool and skillful.

To the bushwhackers it was a matter of keen enjoyment. Hague roared and yelled and urged the combatants on.

Meldon, over-confident and alive with hatred, tried to end the contest in a rush.

He quickly found that this was impossible. Will Prentiss held his own.

And what was more, the villain soon discovered that he had a stronger wrist. The end came all of a sudden.

Meldon tried for a fierce feint and circling blow. Will avoided it by a close margin and then, with lightning quickness, went under his foe's guard and gashed his sword arm to the bone.

Meldon's blade fell with a clang, and with a yell of agony he shrunk back. One moment Will Prentiss stood over him.

A few moments before he had stood ready to kill the scoundrel. Such a thing as sparing his life had not occurred to him.

But now, as he looked at him, a miserable craven spectacle, he held his arm back.

It was by far too much like murder. He could not do it.

"Kill him!" yelled Hague, fiercely, "his life belongs to you. Kill him!"

"No, no!" begged Meldon. "Don't take advantage of a man. Fair play!"

Will's lip curled in scorn.

He laid the sabre down and folded his arms. He looked at Hague and said:

"He may have his worthless life. I do not want it!"

"You are a fool!" said Hague, contemptuously. "He would not spare you!"

"My brother is right," cried Nell, with flashing eyes. "It is cowardly to strike a disabled man."

Meldon's eyes sought the fair girl's face a moment. He then cowered back abjectly against the wall of the cavern.

Will now turned to Hague and said:

"Are you satisfied?"

The bushwhacker grinned and for a moment hesitated. But he nodded and said:

"Ye're a free man! I'll give ye escort to yer own lines."

In a few moments half a dozen of the bushwhackers advanced and led Will and Nellie and Payton from the cavern chamber.

Down through the dark ravine they went and soon were upon the other side. Here the bushwhackers paused and the leader said:

"We can go no further!"

"I thank you," replied Will. Then he gave Nellie his arm and with Payton they started on their way to camp.

A short while later they were hailed by their own picket. Will made himself known and they passed into the camp.

It was an early hour and the sun was just creating a gray light in the east. Will found that the camp was astir and great excitement reigned.

The absence of the young captain and the escape of Meldon had been discovered and created a sensation.

A party was just being organized to go in quest of young Captain Prentiss. The boys burst into cheers as he walked into camp unharmed and with Nellie on his arm.

It did not take Will long to tell his story. Fred Randolph was anxious to go in quest of Hague and his band.

But Will said:

"No! Let them alone. They spared our lives and we will not do them harm."

Will decided to at once break camp and march southward.

He had been successful in his enterprise, which was the rescue of Major Clifton and Lieutenant Watson.

To remain longer in the vicinity was to incur great risk of being enveloped in the advance of General Wesley's army.

There was no time to be lost, either. In a short while the Virginia Grays had begun their southward march.

It was not necessary now to force the march. They were able to keep along the main highway toward Waterford for there were Union raiders between them and Leesburg.

Nellie was anxious to pursue her journey to Monocacy, but Will would not permit her to do it.

"Wait till we get to Leesburg," he said. "Then you may cross with greater safety at Edward's Ferry and thence go north in disguise."

So Nellie yielded to this advice. It was well that she did.

For on the way to Waterford the Grays had a lively time. They encountered several small detachments of Union cavalry and some sharp fighting followed.

But in due course of time Leesburg was safely reached.

It was then learned that Joe Spotswood and his detachment had gone on in safety to Manassas.

The Grays again went into camp back of Leesburg.

Will and Fred Randolph went on to Manassas the next day and presented themselves at General Beauregard's headquarters.

The reception they got must have been a matter of much gratification to them. The commander of the Confederate forces shook hands with them warmly.

"You have accomplished one of the greatest feats of the war," he declared. "I shall report your names to President Davis and the Confederate Congress, and they will, no doubt, accord you a vote of thanks."

Colonel Fraser was in the General's tent at the moment and greeted the boys warmly.

"I can tell you, General Beauregard," he said, "these boys are fighters and the best tacticians I have met yet. They are a credit to your army."

"I believe you, Colonel," said General Beauregard. "We are all very proud of the Virginia Grays."

When Will and Fred met Joe Spotswood and the little detachment of Grays, there was an interchange of congratulations.

"I'll never forget that experience in the bushwhackers' den," said Will, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I thought my end had come."

"We were puzzled at your disappearance," said Fred. "We were about to send a detachment out to search for you. I can hardly think it right to this day that you did not confer with me."

"Everything turned out all right anyway," said Will. "We went through the foe's lines, captured their men under Fraser and rescued the prisoners. Surely nothing more could be asked for."

"Hurrah for the Virginia Grays!"

"General Beauregard says that General McClellan is about to make another move down the Peninsula toward Richmond."

"He'll get a hot reception," cried Joe Spotswood. "You see if he don't."

"At any rate," cried Will, "the future will give us plenty of opportunity for new achievements which, let us hope, may meet with as full success as those of the past."

The others echoed this sentiment. Then they returned to Leesburg to reorganize and recruit the Grays and prepare for the next call to the front, which was not long in coming.

THE END.

Read "THROUGH THE LINES; OR, THE BOYS IN BLUE ON A RAID," which will be the next number (5) of "Blue and Gray Weekly."

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